

Program is transforming lives

The fund is educating hundreds of Aborigines successfully

Commonwealth Bank chief executive Ian Narev knows that young graduates educated at top-quality boarding schools with the backing of the Australian Indigenous Education Fund have a resilience and tenacity that make them “incredibly attractive” employees. Unlike costly government schemes that have done little to redress Aboriginal disadvantage, the AIEF is Australia’s most successful indigenous education program, consistently achieving school retention and Year 12 completion rates above 90 per cent. The program has grown from supporting 43 scholarship students in 2009 to almost 550 students this year. More than 300 of its students have completed high school and gone on to work or university study. Another 19 scholarship holders have finished university, including Mitch Heritage, a University of NSW commerce alumnus who has been accepted for the CBA’s competitive graduate program. His story is reported today.

The opportunities provided to him and hundreds of young Aborigines to achieve their potential through hard work are making a profound difference to their lives, their families and their communities. For this reason, the program has attracted support from the commonwealth government as well as corporate backing from BHP Billiton, CBA, HSBC, this newspaper and others. As lawyer Noel Pearson, a long-time proponent of boarding school

education for students from remote Cape York communities, wrote in these pages in June, the trend is creating a “revolution” for the better.

Unfortunately, government investment in the AIEF in recent years has lagged that of the private sector by tens of millions of dollars, putting the future scope of the program in jeopardy. Without significant government backing, 500 students will miss out on life-changing opportunities for a good education on AIEF scholarships in the next few years.

While urging the Turnbull government to exercise spending restraint, we are also strong advocates for more effective spending on indigenous support. The need for a royal commission into the child protection and youth detention systems of the Northern Territory underlines the extent of government and bureaucratic failures. The AIEF, in contrast, offers the chance for a modest investment of taxpayers’ money, with every dollar linked to a successful outcome. AIEF chief executive Andrew Penfold is proposing a prudent “one out, one in” model, under which the organisation would receive funding each time a student graduated from Year 12, with the funding to pay for the next student to enter the program. For the sake of Australia’s most disadvantaged young people and the national interest, the government should respond positively.