

Indigenous scholarship holders return home as inspirations

One in five indigenous children on a boarding school scholarship return after graduating to inspire their home communities.



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AIEF Scholarship students Joy Dann, 15, Priscilla Dann, 16, and Agnus Dann, 15, at St Catherine's School in Waverley. They are from a traditional community near Nowra, on the south coast. Picture: Justin Lloyd

One in five indigenous children who took up a scholarship at a boarding school returned to live in their home communities after graduating, a report has found.

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) annual report out on Wednesday revealed that 20 per cent of its Year 12 graduates either got a job in their home community or used it as a base to continue their studies.

Patron and businessman David Gonski said those graduates who had returned to their communities were “inspiring their siblings, cousins and neighbours”.

The report also revealed that more than 92 per cent of graduates were either working, studying or engaged in other positive pursuits.

Despite Covid disrupting learning in 2021, 94 per cent of children in the program completed Year 12.

Justine Brown, 45, a mother of seven and a ranger in a traditional community on the NSW south coast, said three of her daughters were on scholarships at St Catherine's School in Sydney.

When Covid hit, they had to work out how they could all continue their studies from home with poor internet connection.

"They all had their laptops from school and they had dongles to boost the internet," Ms Brown said.

"They studied online from 8am to 3.30pm, then had prep and planning, so their school days were eight hours long and very tiring."

The girls were typical of many of the 345 scholarship students in 2021.

Around 43 per cent were from remote or very remote communities, and despite many lacking connection to reliable digital services, the statistics showed that they persevered through the pandemic to continue with their studies.

Ms Brown said the three girls were interested in subjects such as commerce and global politics, and all were gifted in sport.

An older daughter, who had already gone through the program, was now at university studying construction and engineering.

She said it was a great opportunity for her daughters, but it was also important to teach them about their own cultural history.

"I want them to be independent, young women, with a voice," Ms Brown said.

"I want them to be outspoken, in a nice way.

"But I also like them to remember where they have come from. They are First Nations children and they need to be kept grounded.

"If they don't have that cultural identity, there's a loss inside."

Ms Brown said her eldest daughter, 26, had served five years in the military, while her two boys were "warrior men", helping to fish and dive and feed the family.

She said she was proud of them all.



Andrew Penfold, executive director of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

AIEF executive director Andrew Penfold said “mums like Justine want the same educational opportunities for their kids as I want for mine”.

He said despite excellent results in terms of retention, completion and post school employment rates, the number of scholarships each year had dropped from 500 in 2017 to 345 last year due to funding.

He said the government matched funding from private businesses to help finance the scholarships.

Mr Penfold called for businesses to come forward to help support the program.

He said “every child in a nation as prosperous and successful as ours should have the right to a world class education”.