

# Marking 15 years of setting high expectations for real outcomes



SARAH ISON

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation has allowed First Nations children to “set high expectations” of themselves for 15 years, driving up year 12 completion and university rates across the country.

Since garnering federal funding under the Rudd government, the foundation has connected more than 1200 students to Australia’s best schools and universities, opening up career pathways and opportunities that AIEF alumni have described as beyond anything they could have envisaged before joining the program.

Of those who are given AIEF scholarships, more than 90 per cent finish year 12. This is compared to a 76 per cent completion rate for Indigenous students in major cities and less than 50 per cent of those in very remote areas.

Lowanna Moran, an AIEF alumna from the class of 2010, said one thing the program had given her was the self-belief to help her go on to be a teacher on her grandfather’s country in Walgett, in northwestern NSW.

“I think if we summarise it, it all comes down to high expectations,” she said at the AIEF 15-year anniversary breakfast on Wednesday.



The Australian editor-in-chief Michelle Gunn and Tremane Baxter-Edwards

“If there’s one thing that we can underpin our practice in education in particular, it’s high expectations.

“Creating an environment in which students can thrive, where they’re expected to thrive and where they’re expected to be the best possible version of themselves from a cultural perspective that nurtures their spirit and as a result of that allows them to be the best version of themselves. High expectations is the foundational most important thing.”

Former Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd said in a prerecorded address he remembered getting the program kickstarted in 2008, when AIEF founder Andrew Penfold requested federal funding.

In response, Dr Rudd said he would give the AIEF \$20m if Mr Penfold could match that funding with corporate sector investment.

“Not only did he raise \$20m, he raised to hang a lot more ... so the

whole vision turned reality of AIEF has been made possible (in) what I think is one of Australia’s most successful public-private partnerships.”

During the first year of the AIEF being active, only one student was given a scholarship, and Dr Rudd remarked that “from little things, big things grow”.

The Australian editor-in-chief Michelle Gunn said the AIEF had been “such a force for good”.

“(It’s) an investment ... in the future, young men and women who, in realising their own ambitions and hopes and dreams, will make themselves better, will make their communities a better place ... but also make our nation a better place.”

Education Minister Jason Clare said the program demonstrated “the power of education”, with the AIEF having changed lives of the students and their families. “Because education ricochets through families and ricochets through generations,” he said.

In taking a commitment to an Indigenous voice to parliament to the 2022 election, Labor said the constitutional body would help close the gap on metrics including education. Since the failure of the referendum last October, Labor has been under pressure to unveil a “plan B” but has stressed it will focus on practical outcomes.

Ms Moran said the power of education was it didn’t “make us all think the same”, and encouraged new students to learn what they could but ensure they made up their own minds about issues.



Seymour College student Lily, left, with senator Jana Stewart during the AIEF breakfast at Parliament House on Wednesday

MARTIN OLLMAN/NCA NEWSWIRE