

Differing approaches: Great results

A variety of school types for Indigenous kids is achieving results.



Year 6 student Peyton is one of six La Perouse School leaders.



School boarder Rhys Bedford with mentor Farah Rind.

Local edge

La Perouse Public School in Sydney is building strong and healthy kids.

La Perouse school principal Liz Sinnott was a little dubious about becoming a principal when she took a relief job at the school in 2008.

“That’s a part of us often not having a lot of confidence in ourselves,” says Liz, who was raised around La Perouse, with a Wiradjuri mother and a father of the Yuin nation.

But she discovered she loved the kids and enjoyed working in her own community.

“I have a better understanding of what’s happening because I’m part of it,” Liz says. “I get more satisfaction out of this job than any other job I’ve done.”

At La Perouse, students work to personalised curriculums, and parents and caregivers participate in developing learning plans and targets. The school also has a reading program where students can have a half-hour of extra reading support each day.

“We still need to improve in numeracy but I showed the literacy results to the parents at the end of last year and they were just blown away,” says Liz.

“They were so excited they could see kids making gains.”

Enrolments at the school, where 75 per cent

of the students are Indigenous, are up by 30 per cent.

Teacher’s aide and parent, Honie Golding says community and family being involved in the school, mentoring and incentives are all encouraging the La Perouse students.

“They’re happy when they see their mums, aunties, brothers and sisters come down and visit,” Auntie Honie says.

Breakfast to start the school day is an incentive for kids to come to school, and students attending at least 95 per cent of school days are rewarded with treats such as a movie afternoon or a pizza party.

South Sydney Rabbitohs players come to the school regularly to inspire the kids as role models, and work with them in the classrooms.

“They show the kids that being healthy in mind, body and spirit is the way to a better life when you’re older – and the kids love them.”

Liz believes the school is building self-esteem and helping kids to be educated, articulate Australians.

“We don’t want to be seen as the token little school. This is a New South Wales public school, we teach the same curriculum, we have the same or higher expectations of our kids,” she says.

Taking an independent path

When Rhys Bedford from Kununurra in Western Australia leaves school next year, he plans to become an engineer.

Perth boarding school student Rhys Bedford says he wouldn’t have even heard of mechatronic engineering, the mechanical and electronic engineering career he’s planning, had he stayed in Kununurra. And he says studying at Hale School in Perth is giving him a better chance of achieving his goal.

“The workload here is more challenging,” the Bunuba Kija Jaru student says. “And the challenges have helped me more than if I’d stayed up north.”

He’s already studying engineering in Year 12 and recently attended Curtin University’s Indigenous Australian Engineering Summer School with 22 other students.

Bedford started school in Broome and went to Fitzroy Crossing District High School. “Mum thought we should make the move to Perth for a better education, but then my parents moved back north, and I came to Hale as a boarder,” he says.

For many remote students studying at boarding schools, the main problem is homesickness.

But Bedford says he has no trouble moving between the two cultures. He and Hale



Photo: Richard Syme.



Yipirinya students Joyanne Furber and Marcus Ross, Alice Springs, NT. Photo: Steve Strike.

School's 17 other Indigenous students can talk through any problems they have with Indigenous Future Footprints mentors who visit weekly.

One of those mentors is Andrew Beck. He says that while the students may achieve more academically in the city, he knows they face challenges being away from home.

"These students are used to being around their own people but at a private school they can be singled out, because maybe they're just one of a few Indigenous students at a school," he says.

"After spending holidays in their communities, they have to switch back to a different way of living, with bed times, wake up calls and homework."

Mentor, Farah Rind, who's of Yamatji and Afghan descent, also supports Indigenous students in Perth. She and Beck talk to students about things they may not want to discuss with their teachers and school liaison officers, and organise workshops and social gatherings.

The Australian Government supports the Future Footprints program run by the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, which is assisting 180 students this year. Schools in South Australia and Victoria are looking at starting a similar program.

Two-ways at Yipirinya

Three decades ago Aboriginal elders in Alice Springs took control of their children's education.

Alice Springs town camp elders so wanted their children to be educated in both their own languages and culture, as well as in western literacy and numeracy, that they started a school of their own.

In the 60s, they faced opposition though and waged a 13-year fight to create Yipirinya School, taking their case as far as the High Court.

Yipirinya is now 32 years old. It's a pre, primary and high school, is Aboriginal-designed and run, bi-cultural and bi-lingual, and is one of the few genuinely independent Indigenous schools in Australia.

With a "two-way" curriculum, students are taught their own culture and languages, taking classes in Central or Western Aranda, Luritja or Warlpiri, as well as subjects required by the Northern Territory school curriculum.

"We are all Indigenous and that's the way kids like it," says Benedict Stevens, the president of the school's council.

"They like school. They have breakfast and lunch, and meet kids from other communities, all getting together, which is important."

Stevens is a good role model for the students. He went to Yipirinya in the 70s and his three

children have followed him.

He's used the "two-way" skills he learnt there to become a hospital interpreter.

Yipirinya struggles with funding issues, absenteeism and the disadvantage of many of its students, but elders and the school council can take credit for many achievements.

The school produces cultural textbooks like the *Honey Ant Readers*, which are a unique series of workbooks. The readers progress from mixed-Aboriginal playground language to standard English.

Cultural excursions are a part of the children's schooling and all teachers are supported by Indigenous Assistants, like 18 year old Reece Dudgeon. "The kids like it that I'm Indigenous, and understand them culturally, and that I can help them learn," he says.

The elders have always insisted on having strong, family and community involvement with the school. Through the Home Intervention Program for Parents and Youngsters, organised by the council, teachers like Veronica Ecenarro spend half an hour a day working with the parents of three to five year olds, in family homes.

"We've seen so many positive results," Ecenarro says.

"Parents are children's first teachers, and by taking education into the home, we are giving parents responsibility."