

## Students' role model shows what's possible



BRITTA CAMPION

James Widders-Leece, centre, with Matthew Stewart, 17, left, and Kyh Samuelsson, 15, at Knox Grammar School



JESSICA CORTIS

Up and coming athlete James Widders-Leece never imagined he'd be mentoring indigenous students through high school and empowering them to be their best, after he struggled to attend class himself.

It wasn't until Mr Widders-Leece received the sobering news he would not be able to complete his HSC if his attendance rate slipped even further, that he knew something had to change.

Growing up in Armidale in the NSW northern tablelands, the now 22-year-old had fond childhood memories of kicking around a footy at the local park, preferring to spend more time on the field than buried in books behind a desk. As a proud Anaiwan man, Mr Widders-Leece said this was a reality that other indigenous teens also faced.

"A lot of indigenous kids who are not academically inclined but good at sport fall into the stereotype of just being an athlete like I did," he told *The Weekend Australian*.

Set on a mission to change the school experience for indigenous students, Mr Widders-Leece said he wanted schools to get the balance right between pushing kids and giving them extra support.

"If you told me 10 years ago that

I'd be accepted into university and would be helping students find a love for school, I would have never thought it was possible," he said.

He first saw the struggles faced by indigenous students adjusting to school life after he received a scholarship from the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and left his humble beginnings at Armidale to complete his HSC and play rugby at Knox Grammar in Sydney.

After graduating in 2014, he was signed as a semi-professional rugby league player for the South Sydney Rabbitohs and simultaneously juggled full-time university with his promising athletic career. But everything he knew about footy changed.

"It wasn't making me happy anymore," he said. "I want students to know there's other opportunities out there for them."

That was when he decided to return to Knox Grammar where his job is to mentor indigenous students such as 17-year-old Matthew Stewart from Nowra in the state's southeast and 15-year-old Kyh Samuelsson from Lightning Ridge, in the north, who both said Mr Widders-Leece had become a strong role model in their lives.

"He is a male Aboriginal figure we can go to and ask questions. He's been through what we have and now wants to help us get through it," Kyh said.

An AIEF annual report revealed scholarship recipients achieved a 94 per cent Year 12 completion rate.