

# The saving grace of a good education



ALAN PRYKE

Andrew Penfold at Kincoppal Rose Bay in Sydney with indigenous students Anika Hooker, left, Victoria Ashley, Kirsty Jarrett and Tarley Ridgeway

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BY the time Andrew Penfold was 15, he was running around the back streets of Glebe and Redfern in inner Sydney with a gang of local boys, skipping school, causing trouble and getting drunk in the park.

During the day, Andrew would cross the tracks to attend one of Sydney's exclusive private schools on the affluent north shore.

But after school and on weekends he was one of a group of



**AUSTRALIAN  
INDIGENOUS  
EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION**

rough kids, hanging out in pinball parlours, riding the trains and loitering on the streets.

"By Year 9 it was very obvious to everyone that I was heading in a direction that was not good," he said. "There was a saying in my family: I'd either end up a lawyer or in jail."

The law did get Mr Penfold in the end; he graduated with honours and established a successful

career as a commercial lawyer and banker, working in Sydney, London and Hong Kong.

What saved him, he believes, was a good education. It is this belief in the power of education to transform lives that lies behind Mr Penfold's latest and arguably most successful venture — a scholarship program giving indigenous children the opportunity to study in some of the nation's elite schools.

"If you accept that education is the tool that breaks the cycle of disadvantage, and you accept that indigenous disadvantage in our country is one of the most press-

ing, urgent national priorities, why are we sending our most disadvantaged kids to our worst schools?" he said.

"Forget public and private, there are great schools and not-so-great schools. By all means, let's fix those schools, but given education is the key, why are we not sending our most disadvantaged to the best schools?"

Mr Penfold set up the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation in 2007 with the backing of some of the biggest names in corporate Australia, from the Commonwealth Bank and BHP to legal firm Allens Arthur Rob-

inson, KPMG and Leighton.

Mr Penfold convinced then education minister Julia Gillard and then prime minister Kevin Rudd to back the enterprise, and the foundation has a 20-year contract with the federal government to match its \$20 million contribution. Two years later, Mr Penfold is just less than \$1m shy of raising the \$20m that will enable 2000 indigenous students a year to attend private boarding schools across the nation.

From one scholarship in 2008, the AIEF offered 150 scholarships in 15 schools last year and about 230 places in 24 schools this year.