



Education is the key to boosting Indigenous opportunity



CLAIRE HARVEY
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Andrew Penfold's ears pricked up last week when he heard federal Education Minister Jason Clare observing young Indigenous men are more likely to go to jail than university.

Clare said university costs taxpayers about \$11,000 per year on average, per student.

Jail costs taxpayers \$148,000 per prisoner, per year. For juvenile justice, it's \$1m a year, per kid.

Penfold got out his calculator.

To send an Indigenous child to one of the nation's most prestigious schools costs his Australian Indigenous Education Foundation approximately \$150,000.

That's for six years – the entirety of high school. And the 1200 students who have won an AIEF scholarship over the organisation's 15-year history have an average 90 per cent school completion rate. This year it's 93 per cent, with 50 bright young things to be celebrated at a graduation celebration on Monday night.

"Every single kid who goes to school completes year 12 and goes on to do something productive with their life, they then become an incredible role model in their family. And each time you change your family one by one, you change your whole community. The ripple effect of that is you actually are changing the country," Penfold says.

That brings Penfold – who has a gift for making big things seem simple – to some intimidating numbers.

The Closing The Gap targets for education are that by 2031, 96 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people should have completed year 12, and 70 per cent should have a tertiary qualification.

"We know from evidence that where Indigenous people are well-educated, including university and year 12 completion, there really is no gap," says Penfold, who with wife Michelle quit a finance career in the late 2000s to devote himself to Indigenous education.

But, he says, "there needs to be an upstream supply".

"If you don't have more kids completing year 12, you're not going to be having the kids to go to university."

"Some years ago I saw some data that said to achieve the year 12 Closing The Gap target only involves educating to year 12 an additional 10,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids."

"So when you move away from talking in percentages and start talking about the number of students, it actually feels quite achievable. Of course we (AIEF) can't do 10,000 on our own. But collectively, there's enough organisations out there that have got the track record to demonstrate that if there was further investment given, they would be able to close that gap."

"And literally the only thing holding that back is the funding."



Clockwise from main: Australian Indigenous Education Foundation graduate Kodie Mason, right, with Anthony Albanese at Garmu; MacKillop Family Services district manager Brianna Dennis; Dennis's daughter, Oriana; Kodie and sister Tari Mason

SIMPLE EQUATIONS TO CLOSE THE GAP

Indigenous graduates are now working as police officers, teachers, lawyers, doctors and academics.

And, like Brianna Dennis, community leaders.

Now 36, Dennis left Walgett, in NSW's central west, in 1999 for St Scholastica's in Sydney's Glebe.

"I was really, really excited, actually, for this new opportunity. I was only 11 years old," she said.

"If I'd stayed back home – our family really struggled. I was lucky enough to grow up in a loving home. But the exposure from the educational opportunities presented to me have been critical."

Dennis went to university and travelled the world after school – and was the first in her family to buy a home.

She now lives in Dubbo as the district manager for MacKillop Family Services.

Dennis takes immense pride in seeing opportunity light up her girls, Oriana, 8, and Nhalara, 3.

"Both my daughters participate in gymnastics, something I always wanted to do as a child but didn't have the opportunity locally, plus my family wouldn't have been able to afford it."

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AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS
EDUCATION FOUNDATION

"I am glad my children get to experience what I never could."

Dennis knows sometimes parents are reluctant to let children leave home, for fear they may never return, but firmly believes connection to country cannot be extinguished.

"These educational opportunities are not something for communities to fear," she says.

"Some kids will go away and then come back, and some will stay home and take other opportunities. And both are now enriching community life – in their own ways."

Kodie Mason is one AIEF grad who has come home.

After completing St Vincent's College in Sydney's Potts Point, and a degree at the University of NSW, Mason is back in the vibrant Dharawal community around La Perouse, on Botany Bay's northern edge.

She has started her own business, Malima, teaching traditional weaving techniques passed down in her family's direct descent from the Dharawal people who first came into contact with the Endeavour's crew.

Through her community work,

Mason was invited to write the Australian Dictionary of Biography entry for her distant great-grandmother, Bivarang "Biddy" Giles, an expert fisher and hunter who also founded her own business.

"She had a couple of boats, she was running fishing and hunting tours around Botany Bay, having her own business at a time when Aboriginal people were thought incapable," Mason says.

"So looking at my life – I've got my own business, practising my culture, and sharing my knowledge."

Between these two lives, two centuries apart, came the NSW Aborigines Protection Act, which allowed wholesale child removal and the dislocation of communities from traditional lands.

"We still feel those impacts today," Mason says.

"So to be able to go out and get a great education, and finish high school, go to university – I just feel so privileged."

Mason is excited about the possibility of an Indigenous voice to parliament, and recently got to

meet Anthony Albanese at the Garmu festival in Arnhem Land.

"Our grandparents and great-grandparents, they've all been fighting to have a say in what happens and how they're treated. I definitely think it will make a huge impact in Aboriginal communities across Australia, and we'll start to see more positive outcomes for our people."

If Andrew Penfold is the father of AIEF, Paul Hough is its godfather.

The Marist brother was strongly influenced by Shirley "Mum Shiril" Smith, the famous Redfern matriarch and prisoner advocate who raised scores of children in her own home, and reconciliation activist and priest Ted Kennedy.

He was leading St Joseph's in Sydney's Hunters Hill in the 2000s when Penfold, a Joyce's old boy, approached him with the wild idea to give up his job and volunteer at St Joseph's in a bid to grow Indigenous enrolment.

"He came up with the idea of setting up a fund, which would be \$8m," Hough says.

"We thought that was probably the last we'd see of him for a while. Anyway, he came back in about 15 months' time and said: 'Guess what? I've got it.' He went straight to the big end of town."

"He's got the business brain, and he's got the head that knows how to work it."

Penfold is confident AIEF, which presently takes 350 students per annum, could grow to take 1000 a year on its present model of seeking government funding, which is matched dollar for dollar by fundraising.

Penfold is unashamedly "interested in scale".

"It's not because we are trying to be famous," Penfold says. "The more students we have, the more impact we make on changing the country."

