



Cane country schools teach a lesson in how to defy disadvantage

EXCLUSIVE

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WHEN young primary school principal Nathaniel Train arrived at Innisfail East State School in far north Queensland two years ago, he had a tough message to deliver to teachers and parents: lift your game.

As one of the nation's most disadvantaged schools, where half the students are indigenous, it was

not unusual for students at Innisfail East to refuse to take their feet off the desk.

Many parents sent their children to school just to stop them roaming the streets, rather than to learn. Attendance was low and academic results were worse.

Today, Innisfail East — like neighbouring Goondi State School — is one of a handful of

Australia's most disadvantaged schools whose students are scoring in the top half of the nation's results in literacy and numeracy.

An analysis of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program — Literacy And Numeracy) results conducted for *The Weekend Australian* by the Grattan Institute shows that among the 1000-odd most disadvantaged primary schools in the nation, 46 score above the national average in reading, writing and numeracy.

Five of those schools are among the 10 per cent most disadvantaged primary schools in the nation, including Goondi and Innisfail East.

The Weekend Australian today includes a special schools report analysing NAPLAN results to

identify the nation's top-performing schools.

The analysis, based on reading, writing and numeracy scores, provides tables of high-performing public and private schools, girls', boys' and co-educational schools, state by state and nationally.

Goondi State School lies across the Johnstone River from Innisfail East. Principal Arthur Sclipa has spent two decades overseeing a school where academic results are high despite the hardships faced by its students and their families. Mr Sclipa, too, sets the bar high for his students and teachers, and refuses to accept excuses.

Both Mr Train and Mr Sclipa dismiss suggestions their results are a statistical anomaly or that there's something in the water in

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LYNDON MECHIELSEN

Students at Goondi State School in Queensland yesterday





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Innisfail, one of Australia's wettest towns.

Rather, the secrets to their success are encouraging passionate teachers not to waste a moment of classroom time on needless "busy work"; regular and rigorous statistical analysis of results; spending the equivalent of two days a week as principal in the classroom; and, above all, a relentless drive for excellence.

"High expectations are the critical thing," Mr Sclipa said at his school yesterday. "Regardless of the student's background, it's a belief they will excel and achieve."

Innisfail, 90km south of Cairns, is surrounded by banana plantations and canefields, and its economy is sustained by agriculture. Of the 9000-odd residents, more than 15 per cent are indigenous, one-third work in labouring or a trade and 8.1 per cent are unemployed, compared with 5.6 per cent nationwide at the latest census. The median household weekly income is two-thirds the national average.

For Mr Train, the

disadvantage is meaningless.

When he arrived at the school in 2011, he was dismayed to find poor academic results, but even more disappointed to find some teachers believed their students would never be more than average. "So the kids felt the same way," he said.

Things had to change, and they did, swiftly. Mr Train replaced half the teachers — through transfers, retirements and resignations — and began assembling his "dream team": experienced Innisfail East hands

and fresh faces. With the extra money from national partnerships for low socio-economic schools, Mr Train appointed his Year 7 teacher as the school's "coach", responsible for overhauling the curriculum and training teachers in an explicit instruction teaching method.

Rather than a hodge-podge of lessons, each teacher now has a tight, daily schedule to follow, with an overwhelming focus on literacy and numeracy. Each class begins with a "warm-up", a recited chant used to commit

crucial information from short-to long-term memory.

Two years ago, he visited Mr Sclipa's school — recognised in the region as a benchmark for excellence — and realised he had a lot of work ahead of him.

"I'm astounded at how quickly things have turned around," Mr Train said, of his students' NAPLAN results.

Year 3 teacher Donna Dorries, who has worked at Goondi for 10 years, said the explicit instruction method was "just the best thing".

"Rather than a lot of teaching I've done, which was about (the children) making mistakes and learning from them, with explicit instruction I am teaching them the right way from the start," she said. "It's amazing what the children can learn if you expect them to perform well."

For Cassowary Coast Mayor Bill Shannon, the schools' results are a source of immense pride.

"It means you can get a good education and a decent start in life, even if the area you live in is regional, or is considered disadvantaged," he said. "To me, it's not a surprise at all."

DEFYING DISADVANTAGE

School	State	Sector	Indigenous		Score #
			students	ICSEA*	
Dandenong North Primary	VIC	G	1%	946	2850
St Albert's, Loxton	SA	C	7%	948	2833
St Albans Meadows Primary	VIC	G	3%	943	2830
Goondi State, Innisfail **	QLD	G	19%	915	2829
Murwillumbah East Public	NSW	G	8%	944	2815
Narrabri West Public	NSW	G	16%	930	2812
Broken Hill Public	NSW	G	15%	935	2794
St Joseph's Parish Primary, Springvale	VIC	C	N/A	943	2792
Guthridge Primary, Sale	VIC	G	8%	938	2790
Iluka Public	NSW	G	8%	942	2787
Innisfail East State **	QLD	G	45%	803	2786
Miallo State	QLD	G	11%	943	2779
Albion Park Public	NSW	G	8%	951	2778
Broadmeadows Primary	VIC	G	0%	936	2777
Llandilo Public	NSW	G	6%	951	2769
Echuca East Primary	VIC	G	11%	947	2765
Kings Park Primary, St Albans	VIC	G	1%	950	2762
Glebe Public	NSW	G	29%	936	2761
Albion North Primary, Sunshine	VIC	G	0%	943	2761
St Pius X, Heidelberg	VIC	C	3%	947	2759
National average				1000 (index)	2692

G = Government school C = Catholic school

Schools with fewer than 100 students were excluded

Sum of reading, writing and numeracy scores in 2012 NAPLAN tests

* Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, a measure of socio-economic status including family education and income developed from the My School website

** Schools in the bottom 10 per cent of ICSEA scores

Source: MySchool.edu.au