

Independent Schools Guide ADVERTISING FEATURE

Closing the gap, fostering success

The 2020 Australian School of the Year nurtures a positive sense of identity in its First Nations students, writes Mal Chenu.

When Lavinia Williams was not much older than the children she now teaches, she had to move away from home to pursue her education.

Williams is a kindergarten teacher and Aboriginal education consultant at Gawura School, a kindergarten to year 6 school for First Nations children attached to St Andrew's Cathedral School (SACS) in Sydney's CBD. Gawura is a word from the Eora (Sydney) region, meaning 'whale'.

"I am a proud descendent of the Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay Peoples. People of Black Soil Country, People of Dhinawan the Emu," says Williams.

"I spent my childhood in Goodooga, a village in north-west NSW about 40 minutes from Lightning Ridge. And five hours to the nearest major shopping centre.

"When I was 12 years old, I moved to [Sydney's] Alexandria with my grandmother and I remember longing for my community.

"At the Gawura School, the sense of community is strong and vibrant. Gawura is like a family. The children are dedicated and have a desire to represent their communities."

When it was named Australian School of the Year at the 2020 Australian Education Awards, the judges noted Gawura had an "innovative approach to a First Nations-led education within a mainstream system. It's great to see a greater emphasis on ensuring that the broader school community has a high level of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives."

Established in 2007, the school gives city children access to quality education along with vital cultural and academic support. Williams says the school fosters a positive sense of identity and culture.

"The smiles on the faces of the children tell us they are excited about what's going on in their lives and at school. This gives me purpose and holds me strong to the power of education and culture.

"Gawura and SACS are safe environments to learn and grow. Working here gives me a great sense of accomplishment, pride and belonging."

The school's education model is unique. A typical day blends standard



From left, students at Gawura School; NAIDOC Week celebrations; Aboriginal education consultant Lavinia Williams.

curriculum subjects with key Aboriginal cultural touchstones.

"Throughout the day, students attend specialised classes in personal development, physical education, music, science and art," says Williams.

"Popular extracurricular activities include Aboriginal dance lessons with Uncle Matt Doyle and Wiradjuri language lessons with Aunty Leanna and Aunty Tanya.

"We take the responsibility of delivering quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' content very seriously and treat it with the utmost respect. The children sense this and

pay that respect forward." All graduating Gawura students are offered scholarships to SACS for their secondary education. SACS knows these students are ready to step into year 7 because they have been nurturing and preparing them with this as the goal.

As the School of the Year judges observed, Gawura is a "lighthouse program in Indigenous education with wonderful, almost unheard-of outcomes."

Dr John Collier has been head of school at St Andrew's and Gawura School since 2010. He says these



"almost unheard-of outcomes" are demonstrated by students in their early years and beyond.

"Our NAPLAN results have been above the national average, not just for Indigenous groups, but for all ethnicities. This is a stunning achievement, as many Aboriginal students do not go to preschool. This means there is an initial gap in literacy and numeracy. Gawura's enhanced programs close this gap and have them ready for year 7," he says.

"We're also delighted with our alumni. Some have done extraordinarily well. And I say

'extraordinarily' because in many cases their parents did not have secondary education.

"One former Gawura student is graduating with an arts/law degree. And her twin sister is in the final year of a PhD. Another has just returned from Oxford with a master's degree in health sciences. Yet another is doing second-year medicine."

Collier, who is in his final year at SACS, says the School of the Year award is a tribute to the Gawura program and the hard work of those involved.

"Aboriginal education is never easy.



Dr John Collier, head of school at SACS and Gawura.



There are many hurdles and obstacles. The award is an affirmation that we should keep going. We're always learning and adding specialised staff.

"We employ 10 Aboriginal staff and have mentors and elders on site to work with the students. It is difficult to live in two worlds - being Aboriginal and learning in an education system effectively imported from England.

"There is a long history of well-meaning paternalism in Western education and we need a translation process to cross the cultural divide. To this end, we have regular meetings with Gawura parents, where new programs and initiatives are discussed.

"We need to teach not just about Aboriginal culture but through Aboriginal culture. We want students to be immersed in their Aboriginality and to be proud of it."

By addressing disadvantage and providing a reconciliation program in

practice, Collier believes they are advancing the cause of Indigenous education and benefiting the wider SACS community at the same time.

"One of the nicest things I see is student friendships forming without any sense of ethnicity. Many SACS parents can see Gawura is a Christian social justice initiative. Some have even told us they enrolled their white Anglo-Saxon children at SACS because of their respect for the Gawura program."

Collier hopes the Gawura example is noticed by governments who could provide the funds to address widespread Aboriginal educational disadvantage.

"Governments have not yet come to the party with secondary funding. This lack of vision means we depend entirely on philanthropy. Government needs to get beyond rhetoric. For all of the announcements of the past, the lack of real delivery is a scandal."