

The Australian

Revolution? Let's call it a school that works well

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In one year the school at Aurukun has come a long way, and given us all a sliver of hope

I ALWAYS thought an "education revolution" was unlikely but, like many, I hoped for at least an "education evolution".

This month in Aurukun in far north Queensland I saw the most amazing development in the schooling of disadvantaged children I have ever witnessed.

It is not a revolution; it isn't that radical in itself. It didn't start with a student-parent uprising. The classes take place in an ordinary school room, the teachers don't outnumber the students, and if a teacher is using an iPhone, it is to keep the time.

Most important, it uses a system that has been in use for more 40 years and a spin-off of the kind that taught me to read in Perth in 1974.

Also, it is truly an evolution in that it's a partnership between the Queensland education department and Cape York Partnerships.

The reasons why kids from disadvantaged communities don't do as well at school as their mainstream Australian peers are always a complex mix of factors: school effectiveness, family support, community safety, health care, nutrition, etc.

Overall the town of Aurukun is starting to look increasingly functional, and the positive changes there can't be attributed only to the school's new mojo

Welfare reform is having an effect, the Queensland Family Responsibilities Commission appears highly effective, the town store has a great selection of fresh food (and no plastic bags), the alcohol management regime seems to be doing a good job, and as someone told me "the head policeman is a good bloke".

But it's at the state school where the changes are most pronounced.

In previous years very few students would advance even close to a full-year level of study during each calendar year. In simple terms, of the approximately 200 students, less than 20 "student years" of advancement were achieved each year. A handful of children went up a year, the rest advanced only a fraction of a year each.

At the beginning of 2010 there were no students in the town of Aurukun who were reading at their normal grade level, and more than half of the children in grades 3-7 were still at kindergarten level reading, or below.

When I heard this I was dumbfounded.

Not a single child, in an entire town, at their proper grade level in what is the basic building block of education.

The economics was roughly this: by dividing the total cost of the school by the number of "student years of advancement" in aggregate across the school, I calculated the cost per student of year advancement at around \$150,000. In other words, to get one student to go up one year was costing us that much.

In 2010 there have been more than 200 student years of advancement, with one of the prize-winning kids advancing three years and a number of other students achieving a jump of two years.

I work that out at less than \$20,000 per student for a year advancement.

At the start of the 2010 school year, the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy was established and it installed a new teaching program there. At the centre of this program is a teaching method called Direct Instruction that has seen dramatic improvements in its first 12 months of operation.

The Direct Instruction system is marginally more expensive, including extra training, teacher coaching and materials, but in terms of the real cost, the cost to lift a kid a grade, it is dramatically lower than the conventional system.

If we start to add the cost to Australia of releasing functionally illiterate teenagers into the world, the true costs of the old system are much, much higher.

Direct Instruction is built on a belief that all students can learn and any failure is a reflection on the teaching system, not on the students. It is backed by more than 40 years of literacy success in some of the most disadvantaged schools in the US.

The success of the program is attributed to its unique approach to keeping students tuned in and striving for success. The starting point for each child is determined by initial assessment and progress is determined by constant, objective testing and review by Direct Instruction experts, trainers and coaches. Seamlessly built into the program, this forms a fun part of the learning experience. Where last year I was told the children were bored and disrespectful, this year I saw them engaged, participating and actually learning how to read.

It was incredible to see students in first grade reading a chapter book out loud during one-on-one testing. (Note: my smarty pants, private school-educated girls were not doing this at the same age.)

We witnessed the excitement of an end-of-year presentation ceremony, where students were awarded prizes for academic achievement, school attendance and participation in after-school clubs.

Awards included reading material and, of course, a few gifts from the South Sydney Rabbitohs that went down well, even in Brisbane Broncos territory.

I was inspired by the kids and saw a town that is starting to work. Perhaps it is a tiny sliver of hope for the future of remote indigenous towns.

Divonne Holmes a Court, Peter's wife, is a board member of the Cape York Australian Aboriginal Academy, which partners with Education Queensland for the schools that operate in Coen and Aurukun.

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