

Remote school shifts gears for brighter future

Michael Gordon, Aurukun Published: August 11, 2012 - 3:00AM



THE last time Tony Abbott visited Aurukun, a remote indigenous community on the west coast of Cape York, a young and angry girl pulled a kitchen knife on him when he arrived late one morning at her home as volunteer truancy officer to inquire why she wasn't at school.

"We were standing in the courtyard of the house and suddenly she picked up a knife and rushed in my general direction," the Opposition Leader recalled yesterday. "It was all over in a couple of seconds and she passed a couple of feet from me, but it was pretty disconcerting."

Mr Abbott volunteered in the role for 10 days in 2009, and says his first thought after the episode was for his offside. "And I thought to myself: 'You've got to take your hat off to these guys. It's often pretty challenging work'."

Yesterday, he returned to a school transformed and a community that is safer and happier thanks to welfare reforms and the closing of the tavern - but still has some distance to go. Abbott arrived with a posse of business figures to volunteer for what Noel Pearson calls "sweat equity" - a working bee at the school. James Packer was a late scratching, along with Ryan Stokes and Andrew Forrest. "But he made a very substantial donation," Abbott said.

Among those who did arrive for a mix between *Backyard Blitz* and *The Renovators* in the north Queensland heat were Wesfarmers' Richard Goyder, ANZ's Graham Hodges, Rio Tinto's David Peever and retailer Gerry Harvey.

Abbott's sense of excitement and satisfaction was palpable. "This could not be more different to what it was three years ago. Three years ago, the kids couldn't sit still for longer than 10 seconds, almost none of them could read a simple story and the classroom was a hubbub of distractions."

The transformation of the school is the product of a partnership between the Queensland education department and the Pearson-inspired Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy, with a form of teaching known as "direct instruction" delivering staggering results.

School principal Patrick Mallett says school attendance is up from around 38 per cent in 2009 to be in the 70s and that a majority of students are either approaching or exceeding national benchmarks.

The key is not just an emphasis on scripted lessons and consistency, but being able to pinpoint where a child is in his or her literacy and numeracy development and make adjustments to maximise progress.

"To be at the coalface where daily we see children's lives transformed is an absolute privilege," says Mr Mallett, 48.

The transformation isn't confined to the classroom. Back in 2005, I visited Aurukun with the then Treasurer Peter Costello and witnessed elders including Rebecca Wolmby and Martha Koowarta plead for welfare reforms to force parents to take responsibility. A trial of income management reforms began three years later, followed by the closure of the tavern.

Mrs Wolmby, 78, is now a director of the community's justice group and a volunteer in an after-school program called Culture Club. She says there are still problems with sly-groggers who bring alcohol into the community, and with

gambling, and with the lack of jobs. But things are much, much better. Her worst fear is that the tough stand on alcohol will be relaxed.

"If they put the tavern back, they'll be fighting all the way home." Her fervent hope is that the transformation continues.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/remote-school-shifts-gears-for-brighter-future-20120810-23zya.html>