

# Cane-country schools teach a lesson in how to defy disadvantage

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. Read Next 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. [GRAPHIC: Defying disadvantage](#)

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 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."

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