On target to follow their dreams

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Noongar teenagers Tayla Winmar and Jenaya Colbung have big plans for life after they finish high school on Western Australia’s picturesque south coast.

“I’m the youngest of four and I’m going to be the first to finish Year 12,” says Tayla, 17, who is getting As in her science subjects. She is fascinated by rocks, shells and old books, and wants to study the structure of bones at university next year and become an osteologist.

Jenaya, 15, has more time to decide her path but she is sure it involves university. A gifted netballer, she likes the idea of a job in sport.

These are not just dreams. Tayla and Jenaya are literally working towards their goals.

Twice a week, when their lessons finish for the day at Albany Senior High School, they go to a classroom on campus for a deceptively simple homework program that is quietly helping indigenous students achieve measurable results.

The Graham Farmer Foundation’s Follow the Dream program has survived largely on corporate sponsorship but it is a blueprint for government, according to the foundation’s patron, Sue Gordon.

Ms Gordon, a former Children’s Court magistrate, knows Australia has not been meeting targets to close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students on school attendance, numeracy and literacy. “What we need to do is fund the programs that actually work,” she said.

“In education, programs get funded for political reasons. It should be about results.”

Follow the Dream began pairing kids with tutors in Western Australia 23 years ago and has recently been rolled out to Alice Springs and Groot Eylandt. It now tutors 1380 indigenous teenagers in 10 towns and cities.

The commonwealth is putting in money at two of those sites. An assessment of the program by PricewaterhouseCoopers, commissioned by the WA government last year, found its students were up to 60 per cent more likely to finish Year 12 than other Aboriginal teenagers.

School attendance among Follow the Dream students — the program operates in high school years only — was 87 per cent last year. Overall, it was 83.2 per cent for all indigenous students in 2017, according to last year’s Closing the Gap report.

Assessments of Follow the Dream show that children who take part improve their grades and are more likely than other indigenous students to get into university, although the program is not blinkered about tertiary education — a job or an apprenticeship straight out of Year 12 is also considered a good result.

Last year, 92 per cent of Follow the Dream students successfully completed Year 12. Though the gap is closing nationally between indigenous and non-indigenous students when it comes to Year 12 attainment, in 2016 only 65.3 per cent of indigenous people aged 20 to 24 had completed Year 12.

Of last year’s Follow the Dream graduates, 91 per cent are now working, studying or in training — 33 per cent are at university, 26 per cent are in apprenticeships or traineeships, 23 per cent went straight to a job and nine per cent are at TAFE. Nine per cent have deferred study, are travelling or looking for work.

Jenaya, whose older brother is a Follow the Dream alumni now studying sports coaching, says the program has helped her lift her grade in human biology. “I like it more now too,” she said.

Making a difference

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<th>Follow The Dream students</th>
<th>Aboriginal secondary in WA</th>
<th>Non-indigenous secondary students in WA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School attendance rates</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completion of Year 12</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>88%</td>
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Source: Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation, Department of Education

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