

# Tracy puts her money where her mouth is



Tracy Saunders: "I see a lot of expectations of Koori kids being watered down ... Academically, I expect the same from everyone."

**E**IGHT years ago, Tracy Saunders became an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) after a tense meeting with non-Indigenous parents who complained about the disruptive classroom behaviour of Aboriginal students at her child's school.

Ms Saunders says the five-year-olds "didn't want to be there ... they didn't understand the rules of the game. They didn't like the rules of the game."

Some of the Aboriginal students were so difficult that she nearly quit in the first three weeks.

Four years later, Ms Saunders began exploring teacher education study options so she could move beyond being an AEW with no career pathway.

"I just started asking at the (AEW) conference 'Are you studying to be a teacher? Where do you go?' Everyone said, 'Go to ACU (Australian Catholic University) Yalbalanga.'"

Each semester, Ms Saunders does two separate weeks of intensive, residential study in Sydney – 'Res Week' – with like-minded, mainly mature-age students from across NSW. "I'm able to work, have a family

(with three children) and still study," she says.

"We all share a common story. We were tired of sitting in the back of the classroom watching the way things were being done for our kids. So we all put our money where our mouths were, basically.

The "brilliant support" for students includes workplaces granting special study leave and accommodation being organised so students can concentrate on their study.

"I have prioritised study, work and family, and anything after that sort of fell away – so no social life. Res Week is basically your social life in one hit," she says.

## High expectations

Ms Saunders is looking forward to teaching, with high expectations of students, when she completes her degree next year.

"I see a lot of expectations of Koori kids being watered down ... Academically, I expect the same from everyone," she said.

As an AEW, Ms Saunders understands the importance of

community in education.

"You've got to know what's going on out in the community because you're one of the links that brings it into the school. It's their culture being acknowledged in the school space," she says.

Ms Saunders' longer-term goal is to work on improving Indigenous education policy and course content.

"I think we need more education of not just our current teachers but our pre-service teachers," she says.

"I've done four Indigenous units in my course, but I think mainstream students barely do two. It's kind of ironic.

Ms Saunders says that with a large vision "you've got to start taking bites somewhere".

"Pre-service teacher education is where I'd like to start taking the bites," she says.

The Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) works with the MATSITI project team to support the commitment of universities to increase graduate numbers through the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative.

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