Capital works not the principal outcome

Fixing education may begin with buildings but is really all about teachers and students

JUSTINE FERRARI

ON a rainy day, the playground at Moree East Public School floods with such intensity it forces the students to take off their shoes and socks and wade through knee-high water that reaches the second step leading up to their classroom.

About 200km west at Walgett, the high school received a third science lab for its 100 students and a roof over the playground from Labor’s Building the Education Revolution. But it protects a busted concrete playground full of trip hazards and rusty downpipes.

It was these types of conditions that prompted a furious outburst by NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli in state parliament last year. He named Walgett High and Moree East as two of the worst examples in which the community “treated Aboriginal people like rubbish”.

“These schools would never be in this condition if they were in Sydney,” Mr Piccoli said. One year later, The Australian accompanied Mr Piccoli on a tour of some of NSW’s most overlooked bush schools, including Walgett Community College and Moree East Public. They have been delittered and repaired. But there is still much to be done.

Plans have been finalised to demolish the Moree East school and spend $15 million building a new one, while the NSW government will spend $7m at Walgett to rebuild part of the school and renovate the remainder.

The building works are part of a $35m capital works program being rolled out across 15 of the state’s poorest performing schools. It is not just about physical capital. Under the Connected Communities plan, highly experienced, well-paid executive principals are appointed to co-ordinate education, health and other social services in partnership with the community.

There are early signs of an improvement in literacy and numeracy. Three-quarters of prep students had reached the expected level for their age in literacy by September and 85 per cent had met the numeracy standard.

Walgett High deputy principal Bryce O’Connor said even the initial cosmetic changes, such as removing the graffiti and repainting the bottom floor, had lifted the mood in the school.

The school has restructured its programs with a focus in Years 7 and 8 on core subjects in the morning, when the students are fresher, and more hands-on programs in the afternoon.

For Years 9 and 10, the school has started a foundational skills program in conjunction with TAFE Western, in which students do two TAFE courses a term which lead to a certification in one of the local industries.

Moree East principal Muriel Kelly said the key to lifting academic performance was having the right teachers and building a relationship with students and their families. “These kids deserve the same learning environment as any other child,” she said.
Students Theresa Murray, Jamie-Lee Ward, Tammin Ellis, Margaret Duffy and Libby Lake at Walgett High in NSW