Cattle club steering kids in right direction

JUSTINE FERRARI
NATIONAL EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

WILMA is the new breed of student at Coonamble High School; the shorthorn-cross heifer was raised thanks to the school’s Bovine Appreciation Club.

One of a suite of programs initiated by the school in central-western NSW to engage students in danger of dropping out, the BAC breeds cattle, cares for the cattle, sells to abattoirs and shows its steers at agricultural shows across the state, including at the Royal Easter Show in Sydney.

The Coonamble students made their debut at the Brisbane Ekka this year, beating many private schools at their own game. Principal Margaret Mulcahy is impressed by the students’ dedication, saying some were caught staying up at the Ekka until 2am “in case the cattle needed water”.

In three years, the club has grown from six students to 32, including those such as Sharni McNamara, 14, who did not even like cows before she started handling them. Now “it’s my favourite part of school”, she said.

It is one of the initiatives flourishing in Coonamble under a new approach to schooling introduced by the state government about two years ago in 15 of the poorest-performing schools in the state. Under the Connected Communities program, executive principals were appointed to partner with the community and government agencies to lift performance in the predominantly Aboriginal schools.

Across the Castlereagh River sits Coonamble Public School, which opened a “shopfront” on the main street this year. The primary school lies about 1.5km out of town so the shop acts as a drop-in centre to “bring the school to the community”, executive principal Brian Giles-Browne said.

Of 260 students, about 91 per cent were Aboriginal and Mr Giles-Browne said many of their parents had bad memories from their own school days. “The shopfront is introducing the school to parents and the community in a safe and engaging way,” he said.

School staff are available to talk to parents in the shop, and it is a less intimidating venue for parent-teacher meetings.

It is Mr Giles-Browne’s second stint as principal at the school. He was tempted back by the chance to shake up things under the Connected Communities scheme.

“The focus is on building a connection with the community first and building educational programs on it,” he said.

One of the biggest unmet needs is the mental health issues many students are grappling with, and both schools yesterday welcomed a government injection of $8 million over four years across the 15 Connected Community schools for extra counselling.

At the high school, the cattle club has morphed into a new approach to learning, “enterprise education”, which includes trades-based projects that teach literacy, numeracy and science.

Deputy principal Duncan Lovelock said the BAC gave students “an opportunity to shine and do something that keeps them here … Traditional forms of education isn’t for everyone. We need to be able to provide something for them.”
Coonamble High students Brooke Lesley and Sharni McNamara with a couple of their ‘school projects’