The troubled Aboriginal community of Toomelah in far north-western NSW does not even appear on Google maps, but the 100-year-old school has become a beacon, drawing home families who had left.

The old mission town of about 300 people famously brought former judge and human rights commissioner Marcus Einfeld to tears at the conditions, the violence and dysfunctional families in which many children were living.

For kids like four-year-olds Jaycee and Russell, however, the future is looking brighter. While the community has no preschool or early learning services, they attend a transition-to-school class run three days a week that is showing promising results.

Started last year, the first students to come through the transition class, who are now in kindergarten, are expected to reach the state literacy standard by the end of the year.

It’s a remarkable distance in learning covered by the students in a short time, and the word is spreading.

Families that had left town or sent their kids to school in nearby Cunnumulla and Goondiwindi over the Queensland border are returning, and new families are moving to the community to attend the school.

Principal Margaret Sloan attributed the school’s early success to the NSW government’s Connected Communities program, rolled out two years ago in 15 of the state’s lowest performing predominantly Aboriginal schools.

The program appoints executive principals to oversee the coordination of government services, the power to select the staff and services they need for their students, and the flexibility to try new approaches.

Each school is guided by a community advisory group, which Ms Sloan said was crucial to ensuring the school worked in partnership with the community.

This partnership extends to parents when their child starts school. Every student is initially assessed for their learning, health, developmental, behavioural and mental health issues and individual plans are developed.

“We work side by side with parents. When we develop plans, we have the parents there. They’re partners in the process,” she said.

The school organises speech therapy, psychologist and paediatric appointments, with staff accompanying parents and their children to any doctors’ appointments.

“We’ve had some absolute transformations in children this year. One family thought their boy was deaf but we ran him through our process and he’s actually autistic. Now he’s starting to speak,” she said.

The other strategy Toomelah relies on is analysing and understanding the stage each student has reached. The school tracks student progress along a continuum of literacy and numeracy learning, and the data is analysed for gaps in students’ learning and in teaching.

Leader of community engagement Carl McGrady, who grew up in Toomelah, said the school was the hub of the community: “If we opened the gates at 6.30am, the kids would be kicking the gates down to get in, and then we have to shovel them out at 4.30pm.”
Toomelah Public School pupils Jaycee and Russell embrace a brighter future in the transition-to-school class