

THE NATION

Nile the lifeblood for disadvantaged students



South Sudan-born student Nykur with principal Lisa Wilson at the River Nile School

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Tall and fashionably dressed, with a beaming smile, South Sudan-born student Nykur looks anything but a troublemaker as she sits in class, putting the finishing touches on her school project.

But that's the label she was lumped with when she was introduced two years ago to the River Nile School, a specialist school in inner Melbourne that has become a saviour to disadvantaged migrant and refugee girls struggling in mainstream schooling.

Orphaned in South Sudan and separated from her siblings, Nykur came to Australia alone in 2013 to live with an aunt.

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LISA WILSON
SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

She didn't speak a word of English when she arrived and struggled to understand her teachers, let alone complete her school work. Each year she would fall further behind until she didn't want to go to school at all.

River Nile principal Lisa Wilson said Nykur's experience was a common one among students at the school.

Attendance data for schools in suburbs populated by African migrants has pointed to high truancy rates in Melbourne.

Between 30 and 50 per cent of students enrolled at some schools in Flemington, Tarnet and Sunshine in the city's west and Dandenong in the east are failing to attend school at least 90 per cent of the time, considered the bench-

mark for learning to progress. The River Nile School, which is in its second year of operation, was established in response to concerns within the Horn of Africa community that many children were falling behind.

"Many new arrivals from the Horn of Africa were pre-literate and so especially challenged the mainstream education system," Ms Wilson said. "We decided our priority would be young women and young mums. Often they face additional challenges relating to their culture; many tend to be submissive and they aren't used to asking for help."

The school's 40 students, aged 15 to 20, are studying the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), an alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) typically a pathway to TAFE or employment.

Ms Wilson said that some students had lost years of potential education in refugee camps or detention centres, while others struggled due to family difficulties and a lack of support at home.

The school's approach to education is to take care of students' welfare and wellbeing first; it has a food bank on-site, provides Myki cards for travel as well as childcare.

"I say this is a school run by a business that feels like a family," Ms Wilson said. "We want to create a place where they feel a sense of belonging — that's the linchpin to engagement."

Nykur, 20 this week, has faced a series of personal challenges that has impacted her education. Last year she received news her half-siblings had been orphaned following the death of their mother and were living alone in a refugee camp in Uganda.

With fundraising support, she travelled to Uganda to support them for three months.

However, Nykur, who loves to read in her spare time, has returned to school and kicked off the year with determination to finish her course. Ms Wilson described her as a "model student".

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