

School teaching lessons for life

by Thomas Chamberlin
education reporter

A TINY school hidden away near farmland at Ormeau may have proved the education salvation for troubled teenager Kepa Ilolahia.

The 14-year-old has started tackling his learning and behaviour problems and has set his sights not only on a return to regular schooling, but also a career one day as a chef.

The boys-only Toogoolawa School takes in some of the toughest students who have been excluded, suspended or expelled multiple times from Gold Coast and Brisbane schools with many of the 20 students wards of the state.

Queensland millionaire John Fitzgerald set up the school – one of three he has started – 11 years ago and continues to fund it along with the State and Federal governments.

Mr Fitzgerald, who spends up to \$1 million a year on the institutions, plans to expand up to 40 schools across the nation.

“I came here because of my behaviour and I had difficulty learning ... I was continually walking

out of class and was referred to the school by my guidance counsellor,” said Kepa, who left year 8 of Helensvale State High School last year.

“When I came here I tried to fight everyone off but now we all get along.”

After six months at Toogoolawa, Kepa plans to return to a mainstream school and is aiming for a career as a chef.

School principal Gerry Moloney said most students had learning difficulties at their previous schools which led them to truancy and breaking school rules.

“Some of these kids have come through 30, 40, 50 foster homes and we are the only constant in their lives,” he said.

“A lot of the kids who come here are hurting.”

Meditation is part of each day, one-on-one teaching sessions are offered with teachers focusing on literacy, numeracy, life skills and employability and just like other schools national literacy and numeracy tests are conducted.

The objective is to get students back into a mainstream school, learning centres or TAFE.



Kepa Ilolahia is a student at Toogoolawa School, Ormeau, who is getting his life back on track

● Picture: David Clark