Schools struggle in cyclone’s wake

CRAIG DUNLOP

NINE months after Cyclone Lam hit Elcho Island, levelling houses, stripping trees of their foliage and forcing a mass evacuation, the island’s education system is still in recovery mode.

Elcho Island’s largest school, Shepherdson College, will start the next school year still with a focus on getting “disengaged” students attending school.

“We were lucky in that the school was left largely intact after the cyclone,” she said.

“Children, and then the disruption of living in a tent city.”

On the night Cyclone Lam made landfall, Galwinku residents were huddled in the school hall – also the town’s cyclone shelter – as many of the surrounding houses were torn apart by 160km/h winds.

Now, on average, students are showing up to school a little more than two days a week.

According to education department figures, attendance at Elcho Island’s largest school, Shepherdson College, will start the next school year still with a focus on getting “disengaged” students attending school.

“We were lucky in that the school was left largely intact after the cyclone. In that sense the school has been a constant in the students’ lives, but it’s largely their home lives which were thrown into turmoil,” she said.

“You can attribute it to a lot of things. Certainly some of those include the upheaval of the initial period after the cyclones hit, which was hugely stressful for adults, let alone children, and then the disruption of living in a tent city.”

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According to education department figures, attendance at Shepherdson College was 40.2 per cent in Term 2, it edged upwards to 44.5 per cent, but still more than 10 per cent below pre-cyclone levels.

At Milingimbi School, where the cyclone caused less damage to homes, attendance levels returned to pre-cyclone levels by Term 2. The disruption to the school year comes in a place where cultural factors sometimes undermine students’ attendance, such as in early 2014, when just 11 per cent of students were at school for three days of NAPLAN testing, which an education department spokeswoman said coincided with “sorry business” in the community.

The drop in attendance could have gutted Shepherdson’s budget, which the Territory Government bases on “effective enrolment”.

An education department spokeswoman said to make up for the predicted shortfall, more than $850,000 had been added to the school’s 2016 budget allocation.

Polarising pioneer’s hardships revealed

DAVID SIBENALER

A NEW play will reflect on the history of polarising figure John McDouall Stuart.

Penned, produced and funded by local playwright Danny Gillies, the show is based on the diaries of the pioneering Scottish traveller – and aptly titled Journal.

The one-man show chronicles Stuart’s life from 1860-64, the period in which he made his trek through Alice Springs.

“I thought it would make a good performance and it has relevance to Central Australia,” Mr Gillies said.

He said the show was about perseverance and hardship.

“A lot of people don’t realise how unwell he was. This was 150 years ago on horseback, with a broken right hand.”

Mr Gillies accepts Stuart was a polarising figure.

Following Stuart’s exploration of the region, the Alice Springs township was settled by Europeans some 10 years later due to construction of a telegraph line repeater station.

Stuart has a bad reputation with some based on allegations he was cruel to the region’s indigenous population.

Mr Gillies points to recent protests about a bronze statue being erected of him on the lawns opposite the Royal Flying Doctor Service museum.

“I’m referring to the statue. I have covered that in the script. I address that and I don’t shy away from any of those taboo issues.”

Journal will be staged at the Old Stuart Town Gaol on Saturday, December 5 and Sunday, December 6. It starts at 7pm each night. Entry by gold coin donation.