

Enrolment failures attended to, Djarragun insists

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THE nation's premier indigenous school insists it now has "reliable enrolment and attendance procedures", after enduring a horror year marred by scandal and a fraud investigation.

Djarragun College at Gordonvale, south of Cairns, is in the process of being taken over by Cape York indigenous leader Noel Pearson, who has overhauled its administration, curriculum and management.

The school, which caters mostly for indigenous children from Cape York and Torres Strait communities, has been under police and government scrutiny for months, after an independent audit allegedly revealed it had wrongly claimed millions in government funding for 150 "phantom" students across three years.

The college's new general manager Adam Peut said Djarragun's enrolment and attendance practices were now reliable and had been endorsed by a recent government audit. "The federal government auditor has complimented Djarragun on the overhaul of the enrolment system and our new barcoded system that adds rigour to (the) Denbhi electronic database commonly used in other schools," Mr Peut said.

Mr Pearson installed respected educator Don Anderson, a principal for 35 years with extensive experience in indigenous communities, to run the school after previous principal Jean Illingworth was stood down in March.

Ms Illingworth has always denied any wrongdoing.

Mr Anderson delayed retirement to take on Djarragun and told The Australian the school had a bright future. "We've got to acknowledge we've had some troubles," he said. "But we've got a great product now, one I'm willing to stand beside . . . If a child behaves himself and turns up to school, we will get him to read and write."

He said it was his aim for Djarragun students to be "going into the front door of university".

Mr Anderson has been heavily involved with Mr Pearson's Cape York Academy, operating in three remote communities, where the direct-instruction teaching method is used to great success.

Already, Mr Anderson said students at Djarragun, particularly in the younger years,

were progressing quickly. ``Some of our four-year-old pre-prep students, after only six months of instruction, are now reading two years ahead of their age," Mr Anderson said.

He said the influence of Mr Pearson, who is now the chairman of Djarragun College's board, was the main reason he deferred retirement. ``The only reason I'm there is because of my belief in Noel," Mr Anderson said. ``Noel's been an inspiration to me and is the best educator I know."

The fraud probe is expected to finish this week, when charges may be laid.