THE Australian Rugby League Commission has formally recognised Kadi-na High School teacher Mark Ippolito for building a strong footy culture at his school and keeping at-risk indigenous kids on track.

The league enthusiast and head English teacher was recently named a finalist in the ARL Commission’s One Community Awards.

Thirty of the school’s at-risk indigenous kids are now engaged in the game through the Country Rugby League and Kadina Engagement Program. "For the most part, it’s an at-risk indigenous program for boys and girls," he said.

"We go well and truly out of our way to contact anyone who’s remotely interested in coming to the school about football, anyone who’ll play us in football and anybody who’ll support us in football," he said.

Kadina High School now also has five competitive rugby league teams, one of which finished second in a recent knockout competition against other local schools. However, Ippolito said the program’s biggest benefit had been improvements in student behaviour.

"The sheer decline in discipline issues is ridiculous," he said.

"There are at least four kids who have been expelled from other schools but we have no problem with them. The secret to engagement here has been rugby league." Ippolito recently secured a $20,000 grant from the Department of Education to continue the program and was hopeful about gaining more funding from the National Australia Bank later this year.

When the ARL Commission phoned to tell him he was a finalist in the upcoming awards, Ippolito didn’t believe them. "I just thought it was my mates pulling my leg," he said.

"I just thought it was my mates pulling my leg." - Kadina High School teacher Mark Ippolito

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