

A Report for the Western Australian Department of Education



The Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project in Low SES Schools

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City of Rockingham Chair in Education

with

Dr Kathryn Choules



Centre for Learning Change and Development (CLCD)



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The Department of Education has supported this project in the hope that the research will better inform policymakers and practitioners. The facts and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily of the Department or participants.



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Across the country young people of school age, especially in low SES school communities, are switching off and disengaging from schooling at unprecedented rates. Official statistics show that between 30-40% of young people are not completing 12 years of secondary education. If you happen to be Indigenous, poor or live in rural and remote communities, the figures are progressively worse. Western Australia has a number of special conditions that seem to exacerbate the problem – extended isolation, higher levels of regional poverty and the extensive difficulties associated with the schooling of Indigenous students.

This failure to achieve high levels of school retention and student engagement represents a significant and intractable problem for individuals, families, communities and governments. As a society we are all worse off when young people fail to realise their potential and do not make a meaningful transition to a rewarding adult life. The implications for the individual and society are long lasting and costly in both human and financial terms.

This report documents the endeavours of one small metropolitan high school (Yule Brook College) and two large high schools (Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS) to (re)engage marginalised students through personalised learning approaches inspired by Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA).

The evidence that follows draws on the stories of teachers, school leaders, parents and administrators

to identify, describe and explain the particular conditions that Yule Brook College has created to achieve a profound shift in student engagement and academic performance.

Drawing on the empirical evidence described in this report we can conclude that student engagement is more likely when the focus is on creating small teacher-led community based schools that are highly personalised and success orientated.

At Yule Brook College, we see evidence that when teachers and school leaders have the autonomy and authority over curriculum and instructional decisions, they are able to produce improved student outcomes, enriched parental involvement and enhanced levels of teacher satisfaction and student engagement.

In a nutshell, this report suggests that student engagement in learning will not occur through more rules and incentives, or sticks and carrots, but through the development of what Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) describe as practical wisdom or the “right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time”. At Yule Brook College this insight is at the heart of the school’s emphasis on educating ‘one student at a time in a community of learners’.

We hope the stories and analysis presented in this case study of student engagement in the Big Picture inspired programs investigated serve to inspire others to embark on a similar journey of reinvention.

Recommendations

On the basis of the evidence presented in this report and the lessons learned from the practices at Yule Brook College (YBC), Thornlie Senior High School (Thornlie SHS) and Manjimup Senior High School (Manjimup SHS), we can make a number of recommendations to enhance student engagement in low SES school communities.

1. That current standardised test score measures of school success (e.g NAPLAN) be augmented by instruments that recognise the difficulties of engaging students from low SES communities and take into account non-cognitive learning outcomes (see lesson 10, section 4.1.3)
2. YBC together with Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS be publicly acknowledged and commended as exemplar schools of innovation, student engagement and pedagogical achievement in low SES school communities
3. YBC and other innovative sites be actively encouraged, resourced and supported as mentor schools (hubs) to scale up reform efforts in low SES school communities
4. YBC be given Distinctive School status as an exemplar low SES small high school
5. YBC be funded to support and sustain the implementation of the Big Picture Education inspired model of student engagement
6. YBC continue to collaborate with Sevenoaks Senior College to support the extension of Year 11 and 12 as a part of its Plan of Progression, 2011-2014 with the option of establishing Year 11 and 12 Big Picture cohorts
7. YBC is not viewed as a repository for 'problem kids' because of its success in dealing with alienated students and families
8. YBC be funded to research its journey and achievements longitudinally for the benefit of the system and other schools in low SES school communities
9. That DoE investigate the costs and benefits of creating a portfolio of small high schools as a part of the regionalisation restructure and collaboration between clusters of schools
10. That DoE support YBC to extend its collaborative and cultural links with the community to enhance student engagement in learning
11. YBC design distinguishers based on personalised learning, mentorship, real world learning, independent learning plans and exhibitions become a focus of school renewal in low SES school communities
12. That DoE support YBC to host a national Big Picture Education conference in Perth to enable local schools and regions to learn about current national and international best practice around student engagement in low SES school communities



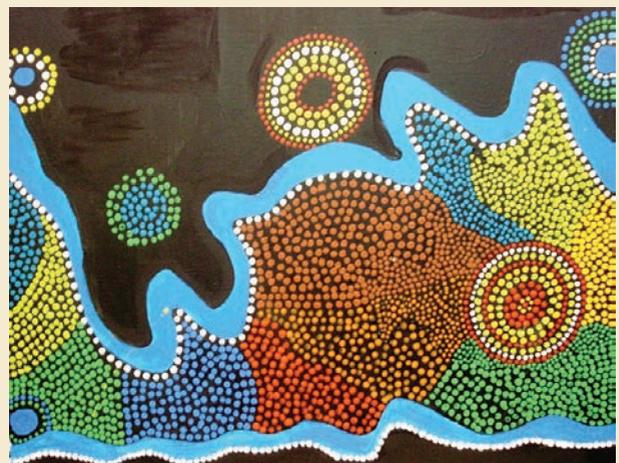


From dropping out to flourishing artists

Two young Indigenous girls – Nina and Chloe (pseudonyms) – were disengaged and poor attendees at school. Both were interested in their culture and art. The year group team leader investigated internships to enable the students to explore their art and expand their natural talent. A mentor was found to assist them in various Indigenous art forms with the intent of the girls developing their own passions and interests. As a consequence, the girls' attendance improved dramatically and they were extremely proud of their achievements. The local newspaper ran a feature story on Nina and Chloe's artwork and the impact it was having on interstate and international visitors to the school. The principal from a prominent Canberra high school was so taken with the art he commissioned the girls to paint a large canvas depicting Canberra and Yule Brook College (YBC) as sister schools. The principal paid the girls a considerable amount for their artwork which now proudly hangs in the foyer of YBC's Big Picture Sister School in Canberra. The girls are now studying art at TAFE.

Despair to academic achievement

Johnny (pseudonym) was a significant problem for teachers, having very low tolerance for any change of routine and a heightened sense of injustice which resulted in abusive and violent responses if there was any deviation to the daily plan. While he was in primary school it was reported that he had been violently assaulted by other students. He had serious emotional and mental health problems with a heightened sense of persecution. At every school he attended there was a history of poor relations with the parents of other students. Regular complaints were made to the Minister for Education. The Department of Child Protection was involved with Johnny's family. The school decided that it was important to involve Johnny's mother with the college and encouraged her to take a more active role in volunteer work. The college also encouraged Johnny to use the room next to the principal's office as his sanctuary where they would play speed chess whenever Johnny needed time to get his emotions in check. This personalised and relationship-based approach meant that Johnny was actively supported through the difficult times and counselled through unreasonable behaviour. The principal contacted the parents directly on issues of concern and a collaborative management approach was established. Johnny was able to achieve a year of low level interventions, very few suspensions and for the first time attended camps and excursions. He also achieved the highest academic results for his cohort in that year.

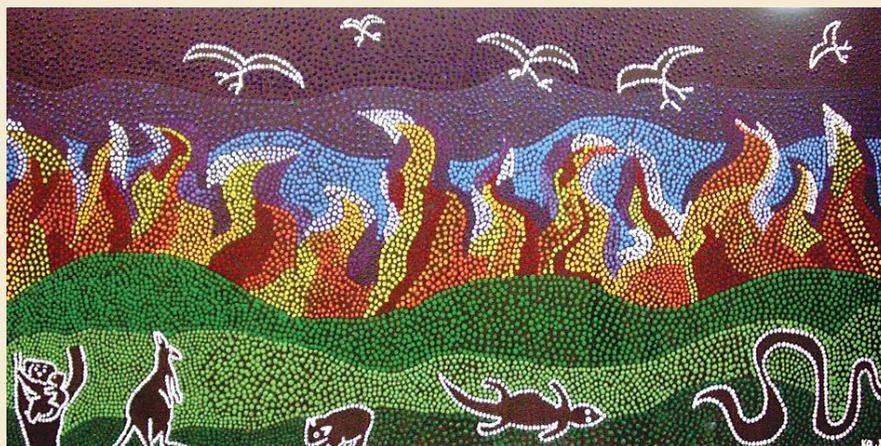


Building relationships for engagement

Mark (pseudonym) did not attend much in primary school but would roam the streets. Both of his parents suffered from physical disabilities. The family was poor and his parents had themselves left school early. Mark's relationship with his parents was not positive. At YBC his attendance had shown improvement but remained very challenging. The Department of Child Protection (DCP) was actively involved with the family. Mark had an education assistant to help him with improving his low literacy and numeracy levels. The college convened a meeting at Armadale DCP with Mark's parents. At that meeting it was decided that the father would come to school three mornings a week and work with his son to build a trailer for a motorbike. This would be done with the support of an education assistant. The mother would come two mornings a week and with her son learn how to cook nutritious and economical meals, again with the support of an education assistant.

They took the food they prepared home, often having sufficient for a number of meals. By keeping this commitment to their son's education the parents 'earned' credits towards the student's fees. Initially Mark did not want his parents to be seen at the school because he was embarrassed. The parents would enter the school through a side entrance while Mark came through the front school gate. Over time this arrangement allowed Mark and his parents to build a sound relationship based around his interests. This was accompanied by a literacy project undertaken by Mark to create an illustrated (photos) story book of the work he did with his parents. This story book was for Mark's younger sister, with whom he had a good relationship. Mark would read the story to his sister.

Stories such as these highlight the importance of YBC's ethos of 'one student at a time'.



1.1 Aim

The Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project in Low SES Schools was commissioned by the Department of Education through Margaret Collins, Director, Canning District Education Office.

In a memo to Yule Brook College, Margaret Collins noted that “Yule Brook College has gained national and international recognition through the successful implementation of individualised negotiated learning programs, parent partnerships, community engagement and direct links to expert mentors”.

The aim of the project is to identify, describe and explain the policies and practices implemented at Yule Brook College, as well as two additional sites at Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS, that appear to be making a difference in terms of student engagement in low SES school communities.

Yule Brook College was chosen as the primary site of investigation because it has the longest history of working with Big Picture Education Australia in bringing about whole school change through personalised learning.

In short, the study attempts to better understand what kind of school culture is being created at Yule Brook College (YBC) to help students like Nina, Chloe, Johnny and Mark engage in learning.



1.2 Objectives

The objectives of the project as set out by the district director are to:

- research the Yule Brook journey to assist like schools in developing their own model for change. The research needs to be validated, encompass existing system data and utilise both statistical and anecdotal data from past and present students, parents and educators
- determine the resources, structures and training necessary to develop an individualised learning program elsewhere
- determine if variations of the model can be employed into larger schools in the system or on a smaller scale. (Manjimup SHS and Thornlie SHS are test case schools)
- support ongoing research on how school improvement works in a low SES secondary school
- determine a criterion of need for a supported low SES engagement program
- gain flexibility in accountability structures, to report in the contexts of the individualised learning programs, within the broader overarching statements of the national curriculum and state frameworks
- recognise Yule Brook College for the innovative groundbreaking work it has accomplished to date
- review the Big Picture Program/Australian National Schools Network engagement protocols at Yule Brook College and determine areas of need as a means of ascertaining support required to continue the programs
- make recommendations regarding an extended role for Yule Brook College; to make alternative education provision for profiled students, to provide training and assistance to other schools and staff and to expand the scope of service and interagency cooperation, all within the auspices of the new regionalisation plan.

1.3 The problem

Young people of school age in Western countries, particularly those from non-traditional, adverse and challenging backgrounds (low SES school communities), are “disengaging, tuning out, and switching off schooling at alarming and unprecedented rates”.¹ Official statistics show that between 30-40% of young people are making the active choice not to complete secondary education. Apparent retention rates in Western Australia show that 66% of full-time secondary students completed Year 12 with the figure for Indigenous students at 37.5%.² Nationally, the apparent retention rate from Year 10 to Year 12 for government schools was 70.1% and 48.4% for Indigenous students.³ In low SES schools 55% of students fail to complete 12 years of schooling.⁴ In regional and rural Australia the figures become progressively worse.⁵ WA itself appears to present a special set of conditions that seem to exacerbate the problem – extended isolation, higher levels of regional poverty and the extensive difficulties associated with the schooling of significant numbers of Indigenous students.

Three main reasons have been identified for non-completion of schooling:

- a non-stimulating environment with no clear relationships to the wider community or the adult world
- lack of support and referral to appropriate agencies for young people who are experiencing problems in their personal and academic lives
- negative teacher/student relationships that are propped up by rules and regulations that prevent young people from expressing themselves as adult and responsible members of the school community.⁶

As a consequence, 15.9% (up nearly 3% on 2008 figures) of 17 year old teenagers are not fully engaged in full-time work or part-time education. These young people were marginalised to part-time work (6.4%), unemployment (4.7%) or withdrawal from the labour market (4.8%).

This marginalisation is even more pronounced among older teenagers with more than 25% of those aged age 18 not fully engaged. For 18-19 year olds the figure was 29.1% and 19 year olds 27.8%.⁷ By whatever metric, failure to achieve high levels of school retention represents a significant and intractable problem because when students fail to complete schooling, then as a society we are all worse off. Young people fail to realise their potential and make a meaningful transition to a rewarding adult life, the wider community is deprived of the valuable contribution young people could be making and society and the economy are unable to access the unique valued contributions that can be made by young people.

The question becomes, then, why do so many young people choose to disengage from schooling? One explanation focuses on the alienating nature of ‘doing’ high school (for students and teachers alike), in particular, the difficulties created by large class sizes, rigid timetables, hierarchical structures, didactic pedagogies, punitive behaviour management policies, poor facilities, undue emphasis on academic measurement, standardisation, competitiveness, streaming, irrelevant curriculum and poor relationships with teachers.⁸

1 Smyth, J., Down, B. & McInerney (2010). *Hanging in with kids' in tough times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage in the relational school*. New York: Peter Lang, p. 1.

2 WA Department of Education (2010). *Annual Report*. Retrieved 17 November 2010 from <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/AnnualReport/docs/Department%20performance.pdf>

3 Productivity Commission (2010). *Report of government services 2010*, 4.28. Available from: <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/rogs/2010>

4 Productivity Commission (2010). Table 4A.88

5 Productivity Commission (2010), Section 4.29.

6 Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. (2001). *Innovation and best practice in schools: Review of literature and practice*, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, p. 3. Retrieved 13 October 2010 from <http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/BEB5F5FB-11FC-4390-86ED-6714EC682E62/1533/bestpractice.pdf>

7 Foundation for Young Australians (2010). *How young people are faring 2010?* Melbourne: Foundation for Young Australians, p.6.

8 Pope, D. (2001). *Doing school: How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic and miseducated students*. New Haven: Yale University Press; and Labaree, D. (1997). *How to succeed in school without really learning*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Under these conditions, many young people (and teachers) no longer look to the school as a venue in which the creative spirit can be developed.⁹ There is a crisis of motivation as evidenced by a general malaise – low quality work, absenteeism, sullen hostility, waste, alcohol and drug abuse and cognitive illness created by a loss of meaning and purpose in education.¹⁰ There is a mounting body of evidence to demonstrate that ‘a standardised curriculum gives nonstandard students no place to go’.¹¹

In this study, one school leader gets to the heart of the problem when he explains how students “go to one teacher, go to the next, do your homework, carry your books around – all the stuff that you have to do to do school – they don’t do it”. In a similar vein, one parent at Manjimup says her boy was “just bored with school”. In this context, classroom teachers also understand that “one size doesn’t fit all, and you’ve just got to try and reach different kids in different ways” (teacher quote). Few people would disagree that there is a problem but there is no consensus about the best way to fix it. Despite numerous attempts to reform high schools the architecture has remained stubbornly resistant to change.¹²

A second explanation tends to focus on individual and pathologising explanations – adolescent psychology, peer relationships, poor attitudes, race and culture,¹³ laziness, lack of motivation and/or ability, low IQ, dysfunctional families, disruptive behaviour, incompetent teachers and poor school leadership, to name a few.¹⁴ In response to these perceived deficits, governments and education systems, with the few exceptions of Scandinavian countries, have largely pursued policies that are ‘muscular, managerialist, punitive, hortative and largely non-inclusive of the people who are most affected, namely marginalised young people’.¹⁵

Rather than blaming the victims of poor educational policies and practices, including single parents, immigrants and refugee families, Indigenous students and children living in poverty, advocates of school renewal argue that the focus needs to be on making ‘the very system which too often contributes to these problems more accountable and more responsive to the needs of such challenged and often marginalized individuals and families’.¹⁶ As MacKenzie argues, there is a need to better understand the sense of ‘alienation, embarrassment, self-doubt, intellectual excitement, struggle, compromise and grieving’ experienced by students from low SES school communities.¹⁷



- 9 National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (May 1999). *All our futures: Creativity, culture and education*. Report to the Secretary of State Education and Employment, United Kingdom.
- 10 Kincheloe, J. (1995). *Toil and trouble: Good work, smart workers, and the integration of academic and vocational education*. New York: Peter Lang, pp.124-125.
- 11 Ohanian, S. (1999). *One size fits few: The folly of educational standards*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- 12 Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering towards utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 13 See Sarra, C. (2006). Young and black and deadly: Strategies for improving outcomes for indigenous students. In M. Keefe, M. & S. Carrington, S. (Eds.), *Schools and Diversity*, (pp. 63-80), Frenchs Forest: Pearson.
- 14 See Valencia, R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. New York: Routledge. This book provides a robust critique of deficit thinking and the damaging impact on education.
- 15 Smyth, J., Down, B. & McInerney, P. (2010), p.1. See also Reile, K. (2006). Youth ‘at risk’: Further marginalizing the marginalized? *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(2), pp.129-145.
- 16 Swadener, B. (1995). Children and families ‘at promise’: Deconstructing the discourse of risk. In B. Swadener & S. Lubreack (Eds.), *Children and families ‘at promise’ Deconstructing the discourse of risk* (pp.17-49). Albany: State University of New York Press, p.33.
- 17 MacKenzie, L. (1998). A pedagogy of respect: Teaching as an ally of working-class college students. In A. Shepard, J. McMillan & G. Tate (Eds.), *Coming to class: Pedagogy and the social class of teachers* (pp.94-117). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, p.96.

In this task, Swadener provides a series of 'what if' scenarios to help us think differently about the problem of 'at risk':

- What if we replaced 'at risk' with 'at promise' and provided enrichment programs and special activities and opportunities, similar to those frequently advocated for 'gifted' children?
- What if schools were opened up for more uses in the community and for more hours of the day and months of the year?
- What if more alternative schools were available so that parents could have an equitable choice in curriculum and educational environment?
- What if current graded, competitive, and increasingly test-driven and individualistic school practices were replaced by non-graded nurturant environments?
- What if we devoted the same energy we are now devoting to finding better identification and early interventions for 'at risk' children to changing curricula and teaching practices into those that are more culturally sensitive and inclusive and relevant to all children?
- What if community and global struggles for social change became the heart of the society and environment curriculum?
- What if traditionally oppressed groups, defined, boycotted and eventually declared a moratorium on the 'at risk' label?¹⁸

Reframing educational policies and practices around these kinds of questions enables us to see all children as facing great challenges and yet 'at promise'.

Importantly, it shifts the emphasis from the victim to 'doing the hard curricular, structural, personal and relational work required' and in the process enables us to 'move beyond the persistent deficit model and closer to the realisation of a caring community for young people and their families'.¹⁹

At YBC, a shift in mindset congruent with this reframing appears to be making a significant difference to the way students are treated. As one senior officer points out:

The difference from our point of view was that when normally received, a child who's having difficulties at school through behaviour, through trauma, whatever, you have difficulty getting them in a placement within a school, nobody wants them. Whereas Yule Brook was always willing to sit down there and work through this, work through it which was always fantastic. (senior officer)

Against this backdrop, the YBC story is a fascinating account of what happens when one school courageously steps out to restructure and 'reculture' itself in ways that better serve its students, parents, community, teachers and administrators. It is a story involving tensions, struggles and successes along the way as cherished orthodoxies underpinning the traditional high school, and the deficit thinking that often informs it, are subjected to closer scrutiny. In the process, YBC becomes a rich laboratory for like schools and the broader education system.

YBC's story is about the kinds of cultural, structural and pedagogical changes required to re-engage (or re-enchant) disengaged students with learning despite the difficulties, impediments and obstacles, in other words, the willingness to 'go the extra yards' for students.



18 Swadener, B. (1995). Children and families 'at promise': Deconstructing the discourse of risk. In B. Swadener & S. Lubreak (Eds.), *Children and families 'at promise' Deconstructing the discourse of risk* (pp.17-49). Albany: State University of New York Press, p.37-39.

19 Swadener, B. (1995), p.42; See also Rose, M. (2006). *Possible lives: The promise of public education in America*. New York: Penguin; and Rose, M. (2005). *Lives on the boundary*. New York: Penguin.

1.4 The study

This project was a collaborative venture involving Murdoch University, Canning District Education Office, Yule Brook College, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS. Empirical research informing this report involved:

- face to face interviews with key stakeholders;
- analysis of official school documents including school reviews, annual reports, NAPLAN, MSE, and WALNA data, surveys of student teachers and student testimonials;
- Departmental records; and
- a range of surveys conducted by Greg Lowry, Principal Consultant, Canning District Education Office.

During the first phase of the project, the research team (Professor Barry Down and Dr Kathryn Choules) analysed official public documents to identify patterns and trends related to student retention and attendance, student behaviour, staff retention and attrition, and student achievement in literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN). As well, a number of surveys were examined to identify how teachers, students and parents felt about their school in comparison with previous school experiences.

In the second phase, the research team conducted 17 formal interviews (individual and group) varying in length from 25 to 60 minutes and amounting to approximately 12 hours overall. These interviews were recorded and transcribed producing 214 pages of typed data. Those interviewed included a senior department officer, a regional director, three principals, two deputy principals, ten teachers and four parents. Interviews and transcripts were supplemented by field notes and records of our time in the schools as well as information obtained from school newsletters and curriculum documents.

The final phase involved emergent thematic analysis to identify those elements (factors) that appear to enhance student engagement. Specifically, the research was guided by the following questions:

- How can schools create the conditions and classroom cultures that promote high levels of student engagement?

- What approach to whole school reform may lead to improved student engagement?
- How can schools and education systems foster a dialogue about the policies and practices that significantly contributes to enhanced student engagement?

In pursuing these questions, the primary focus is on YBC with additional evidence from Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS that operate similar programs although on a smaller scale within traditional structures. The project design focused primarily on the perspectives of adults – school leaders, teachers and parents – with student voices represented through survey instruments and published testimonials. There is potential, however, to expand this study in the near future by getting up close to the daily lives of students as key informants about what works best for them. With these caveats in mind, the story of YBC is a profoundly moving account of one school's journey of renewal in the face of significant structural, social and cultural challenges. It is a story with rich insights and learning about the power of education to transform the lives of teachers, students and parents. Above all, the experience of YBC together

with Thornlie and Manjimup SHS provides some firm evidence about the kinds of principles, values and practices that need to be created and more widely sustained to enhance student engagement in low SES schools.

Throughout the report participants in the study are referred to as:

- **Teacher, Advisory teacher, and year team leader:** participants directly involved in classroom teaching and learning
- **School leader:** participants who are principals, deputies, or program coordinators
- **Senior officer:** participants who are located in central or district office as district directors, managers, consultants or advisors
- **School coach:** participants who are external to the school but employed as professional learning coaches or mentors.



1.5 Structure of the report

This report is comprised of four sections:

1.0 Setting the scene

This section provides some context to the project. It offers an overview of the aims, objectives, the problem, the study, federal and state policies and some preliminary remarks on the issue of student engagement and school change.

2.0 About Yule Brook College

This section turns attention to the project site, Yule Brook College. The purpose is to provide a sense of the college's history, community, students, teachers, challenges and practices. Against this background, the section to follow will focus on the policies and practices undertaken at YBC (as well as Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS) that appear to be making a significant difference to student engagement.



3.0 Student engagement for learning

This section focuses on the kinds of conditions that YBC (as well as Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS) is creating to enhance student engagement for learning. The emphasis is on understanding what's happening and why. To help organise this section, five key elements will provide a focal point for discussion:

3.1 Relationships

This part examines the relevance of creating and sustaining constructive relationships with students, families (in particular parents and carers) and community. The emphasis is on what appears to be working and why from the point of view of those most closely involved, namely teachers, school leaders, parents and students.

3.2 Pedagogy

This section examines the kinds of pedagogical practices that affect what and how students learn, and how teachers teach at YBC (as well as Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS). The focus is on the teaching and learning strategies that lead to success, innovation and responsiveness to students' passions and interests.

3.3 Community

This element looks more closely at the ways in which YBC relates to the community of which it is a part. Where schools see themselves as a part of the community, there is greater likelihood of creating the right kind of cultural settings that will bring parents into the educational lives of their children.

3.4 School structure

This part examines the organisational features of YBC, such as the layout of the classroom, staff roles, timetabling arrangements, and curriculum that help to build relationships, rigour and relevance in students' learning.

3.5 Public policy

This segment considers a range of policy settings that need to be created and more widely sustained in order to better support the work of innovative schools such as YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS to advance the educational interests of students.

In addressing each of these elements the report pursues three main questions:

- Why is this issue important?
- What works?
- What is the evidence?

4.0 Learning for student engagement

4.1 Lessons

This part provides a summary of the key lessons emerging from the research and the implications for policy and practice.

4.2 Recommendations

This section makes a number of recommendations in light of the evidence presented throughout the report.



Throughout the report, we have attempted to allow the voices of the participants (who know the students best) to speak. These ideas are then linked to some of the relevant research evidence and literature through the use of extensive footnotes. In particular, the report draws on and extends important new directions identified in previous research conducted in low SES school communities in the Fremantle-Peel region.²⁰ Where appropriate, additional 'hard data' trends will be alluded to in terms of measurable outcomes as they relate to NAPLAN results and other school based data including attendance, behaviour and parental involvement. The report assumes that the Department of Education (DoE) at all levels has strong evaluation, monitoring and analysis mechanisms in place to monitor and report on school performance data including Annual Reports and School Reviews.

Finally, we want to say something about reading the report. In addressing multiple audiences including politicians, policymakers, administrators, school leaders, teachers, parents and researchers, the final report is rather lengthy. This is due in part to the desire to honour the voices and experiences of key stakeholders as well as incorporating examples of 'hard evidence' to highlight school progress. We also want to ensure that the particular teaching and learning practices adopted at YBC (Big Picture Education distinguishers) are explained and readily accessible to a wider audience. Therefore, the report can be read at different levels by different audiences.

1.6 The policy context

This study is conducted at a time when a range of federal and state policy initiatives are attempting to:

- improve educational performance as measured by international (PISA) and national (NAPLAN) test results; and
- achieve more equitable outcomes for low SES school communities and Indigenous students.

Specifically the intergovernmental agreement or the National Education Agreement (NEA) identifies five major outcomes for Australian Schooling:

- all children are engaged in, and benefiting from, schooling;
- young people are meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards, and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are rising;
- Australian students excel by international standards;
- schooling promotes social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children; and
- young people make a successful transition from school to work and further study.²¹

In pursuing these outcomes the Western Australian government signed three Smarter Schools National Partnership Agreements in December 2008: Literacy and Numeracy; Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) School Communities and Improving Teacher Quality.²²



20 Smyth, J. & Down, B. (2005). *Enhancing student retention: School and community linkages in regional/rural Western Australia*. Canberra: Funded project by the Australian Research Council and Western Australian Department of Education and Training (2005-07).

21 Council of Australian Governments (COAG). (2008). *National education agreement*. Retrieved 17 November 2010 from http://www.coag.gov.au/intergov_agreements/federal_financial_relations/docs/IGA_ScheduleF_national_education_agreement.pdf

22 Available from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/SmarterSchools/Pages/default.aspx>

Whilst all three partnership agreements are relevant to YBC and the performance of low SES schools, it is the objectives identified in the Low SES School Communities Agreement where YBC can make a significant contribution in terms of the wider systemic learning about how best to:

- achieve sustained improvements in educational outcomes in participating schools;
- support and achieve innovation and reform at the school level and foster the dissemination of best practice through independent monitoring and evaluation;
- test reforms in the way schooling is funded, structured and delivered in low SES communities which, if shown to be successful, could be developed into recommendations for system-wide transformational change; and
- contribute to COAG's social inclusion and Indigenous disadvantage agendas through the identification of reforms and models of service delivery that achieve improved educational outcomes for low SES school communities.²³

Furthermore, YBC is well placed to help inform the development of new measures of educational success that understand the reality of the levels of disengagement of many low SES and Aboriginal students.

At all levels of government there is a clear agenda to initiate major school change by:

- mobilising community partnerships;
- increasing levels of parental involvement;
- fostering school autonomy;
- stimulating innovation and flexibility; and
- providing tailored learning opportunities for students most at risk.

In Western Australia, these priorities are evident in the DoE Classroom First Strategy²⁴ and Independent

Public Schools²⁵ program as well as the recent regional restructure, all of which are geared to empowering local schools, decentralising services directly into schools and/or clusters of schools, and shifting the focus to local communities.

In the second part of the report we shall identify and describe in detail a range of specific principles, values and practices developed and implemented at YBC that are consistent with the objectives of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Agreement, Classroom First Strategy and Independent Public Schools initiative.



1.7 Student engagement

A good deal is already known, at least at a rhetorical level, about the generic conditions, the kind of school and community culture, and the strategic partnerships that have to be sustained or brought into existence to promote high levels of student engagement, especially amongst disadvantaged students most 'at risk' of leaving school early.²⁶ We know that schools are designed for and work reasonably well to educate motivated students who have internalised social messages about the long term benefits of obtaining an education. These generally high SES, Anglo-Celtic students are not enrolled at YBC. Rather, the student cohort comprises students who often see no benefit in obtaining an education – because attending school has so far provided little benefit to their parents and extended social networks.

23 Smarter schools national partnership agreement on low socio-economic status school communities. Retrieved on 17 November 2010 from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/SmarterSchools/Documents/SSNatPartnerAgreem.pdf>

24 Department of Education, WA (2007). *Classroom first strategy*. Retrieved from <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/classroomfirst/detcms/navigation/the-strategy/?page=5&tab=Main>

25 Department of Education, WA (2010). *Independent public schools*. Retrieved on 26 February 2011 from <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/independentpublicschools/detcms/independent-public-schools/binary-files/2012-prospectus.en?oid=com.arsdigita.cms.contenttypes.FileStorageItem-id-11366517>

26 Donmoyer, R., & Kos, R. (Eds.). (1993). *At-risk students: Portraits, policies, programs and practices*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; LeCompte, M. & Dworkin, A. (1991). *Giving up on school, student dropouts and teacher burnouts*. California: Corwin Press; Farrell, E. (1990). *Hanging in and dropping out: Voices of at-risk high school students*. New York: Teachers College Press; Smyth, J., Angus, L., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2009). *Activist and Socially Critical School and Community Renewal: Social Justice in Exploitative Times*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishing; and Smyth, J., Angus, L., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008). *Critically Engaged Learning: Connecting to Young Lives*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

In drawing on the experiences of the Victorian Myer Full Service School Project, the following features have to exist in order to engage disengaged students:

- building relationships that are inclusive, engaging and enabling with young people;
- pursuing personal and community development in ways that enable all young people to remake the conditions of their lives;
- bringing into existence schools and communities that actively research their own circumstances and practices;
- considering individual development to be part of a wider process of active community development for young people; and
- integrating cooperative collaborative approaches between schools and other agencies/professionals aimed at ensuring school completion and regarding schools as only one part of a wider community/agency commitment to making a difference in the lives of *all* young people.²⁷

The emphasis clearly needs to be on ‘a schooling system that includes everybody’ and that actively works against both historical and contemporary forces of exclusion.²⁸ Educational anthropologists such as Erickson remind us, “It is appropriate [also] to look outside the school, into the local community and the broader social order ... to identify the roots of educational failure or success, trust or mistrust, assent or dissent”.²⁹ Seen in this way, when students withdraw (or even disengage) from schooling, then they are resisting or withdrawing their ‘assent’. When we say students are ‘not learning’, and by implication when students choose to separate themselves from schooling, it means that they are ‘not learning what school authorities, teachers and administrators intend for them to learn as a result of deliberate instruction’.³⁰ At heart, therefore, is the need to address those

aspects of existing patterns of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and organisation of schools that may unintentionally sustain, marginalise, alienate, and exclude some young people (generally those not from the dominant cultural and economic group). In this task, there are some key elements that contribute to student engagement:

- Students are more likely to be motivated in programs that allow for close adult-student relationships.
- Students’ engagement increases in environments where they have some autonomy in selecting tasks and methods, and in which they can construct meaning.
- Motivation and engagement are enhanced in well-structured educational environments with clear purposes.
- Motivation is enhanced in settings with a challenging curriculum, high expectations, and strong emphasis on achievement.
- Motivation and engagement are enhanced when students have multiple paths to competence.
- Helping students develop education and career pathways can enhance their understanding of school and their motivation.³¹

Framed in this way, the question becomes one of how schools and the wider community collaborate successfully to create the circumstances of trust that work against what amounts to the withdrawal of assent by increasing numbers of young Australians. Practically speaking, this means getting inside the ways in which schools such as YBC go about successfully creating ‘culturally appropriate activity settings’³² that are tuned into the complexities of what is going on inside young lives.³³

27 Lynch, T. (2002). *Full service schooling: Building stronger relationships with schools and communities*. Melbourne: Myer Full Service School Project, p.6.

28 Lynch, T. (2002), p.12.

29 Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of school achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18(4), pp. 335-356.

30 Erickson, F. (1987). pp.343-344. See also Kohl, H. (1994). *I won't learn from you: And other thoughts on creative maladjustment*. New York: The New Press.

31 Grubb, W. (2009). Challenging the deep structure of high school: Weak and strong versions of multiple pathways. In J. Oakes & M. Saunders (Eds.). *Beyond tracking: Multiple pathways to college, career, and civic participation* (pp.197-212). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp.203-205.

32 Munns, G., McFadden, M., & Koletti, J. (2002). *The messy space: Research into student engagement and the social relations of pedagogy*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Brisbane.

33 Draws on Smyth, J. & Down, B. (2005); See full report Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney (2008). *Hanging in with kids' in tough times: Engagement in contexts of educational disadvantage*. School of Education: University of Ballarat.

1.8 School change

The complexity of changing schools in challenging contexts such as YBC (see sections 2.3 and 2.4) requires a fundamental shift in the ways teachers, administrators and politicians view particular communities and the kind of education they need. Foremost is the need to interrupt deficit views about communities, families and students that often lead to lower expectations, 'dumbed down' curriculum, low level vocational pathways, boredom and negative relationships with families (see section 1.3). It also requires a greater focus on the external policy settings that serve to enable or constrain the school's work. Of particular relevance is the need to provide flexibility and differentiation in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, reporting and funding to accommodate unique differences and circumstances. These specific issues will become the focus of discussion throughout the report (see section 3). For now, it is sufficient to identify some of the key conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained to encourage long-term and relatively generalised school change such as:

- local and regional autonomy;
- support for teacher action and learning, at all levels;
- external support which provides new financial and intellectual resources as well as critical feedback;
- a philosophy to which schools can sign up;
- school staff involvement in important debates about change; and
- networks within which schools can share ideas and experiences.³⁴

Thomson neatly summarises the findings of the research on school change as follows:

Schools that change generally have a stable staff, a well worked out philosophy through which reasons for change can be justified and explained, a structure that supports discussion and debate and sufficient autonomy and flexibility to engage in innovation. They are not isolated – on the contrary, they are strongly connected with other like-minded schools. They are supported by external staff and by specific resources for change. They enjoy district and central policies and practices that are aligned with their reform goals.³⁵



³⁴ Thomson, P. (2007). *Whole school change: A review of the literature*. A report for Creative Partnerships. London: Arts Council England, p.54. This report provides one of the better analysis of the literature on whole school change.

³⁵ Thomson, P. (2007), p.55.

2.1 First impressions

“Just come and spend a day here”, says a mother of a student at YBC. Margaret (pseudonym) was very keen to tell us, and anybody else willing to listen, about the profound difference the college was making to her son’s life. There was a certain frustration in her voice as she felt the college had been unfairly typecast as a ‘failing’ school by people who seldom visited the college or did not understand the good things that were happening there. Margaret was excited about having an opportunity to tell her story about her child’s increasing enjoyment with school and success since the implementation of YBC’s reform process. This was indeed a rare opportunity for parents in low SES school communities to have a say, albeit to researchers from a university. We share this incident not only as a way of introducing the YBC community to a wider audience but to draw attention to the importance of deep listening to families and communities about what matters to them and their children.³⁶

Upon entering YBC ‘outsiders’ are immediately struck by the appearance and tone of the college.

Visitors will see:

- students working quietly and independently
- students listening to teachers in class groups
- school grounds free from graffiti and litter
- classrooms brightly painted and interesting
- bold signs highlighting the college’s philosophy and design
- Indigenous artefacts and drawings.

Visitors will hear such statements and comments as:

- teachers talking about the best way to deepen the learning of a student’s passion for motorbikes
- students leaving through the front office telling staff, “I want to come back here next year!”
- Student Services staff and Advisory teachers brainstorming potential places for a student who wants to make his own violin
- an Advisory teacher talking to the principal about a student who had arrived late that day because she had been out all night catching public transport in search of her friends
- teachers asking what the college needs to do better for a student in trouble.

Visitors will feel:

- safe, welcome and respected by staff and students
- confident about the college’s core values, culture and pedagogy
- admiration for the school leaders, teachers and general staff.

Above all, you will gain an appreciation of the mammoth task involved in turning around the educational fortunes of previously disengaged students who can now confidently present to an audience for 45 minutes on a topic they are passionate about. This kind of pedagogical work does not happen by accident. It is the result of a whole school decision,



36 Fiumara, G. (1976). *The other side of listening: A philosophy of listening*. London: Routledge; and Giles, H. (2001). A word in hand: The scripted labelling of parents by schools. In G. Hudak & P. Kihn (Eds.), *Labeling: Pedagogy and politics* (pp.127-146). London: RoutledgeFalmer. These authors use the notion of ‘radical listening’ to describe ways of working with the community, rather than speaking for them or owning the renewal process.

with the support of the local community, to turn the school around by providing innovative and responsive strategies to engage students who thought that there was no point in learning or that they couldn't learn. It is the result of an enormous amount of intellectual work, care and love on the part of all staff.³⁷ It is the result of ongoing attention and reflection. Whilst extremely demanding on all staff there is a strong sense of purpose and commitment beyond what you would expect to find in most schools. Gradually, the preoccupation with behaviour management and physical safety of five years ago (see section 2.4) has been replaced by conversations about student learning. This is a remarkable achievement and testimony to the commitment of the YBC staff and community.

Of course, none of this should diminish the ongoing struggles and challenges faced by the college. These are indeed persistent and protracted issues that require ongoing attention, support and resources to manage. What the college has achieved through hard work is a renewed spirit of optimism and hope for the future.



2.2 A brief history

Yule Brook College opened in 2000 as a middle school (Years 8-10) in the refurbished facilities of the former Maddington Senior High School³⁸. The college was established on the recommendation of the Local Area Education Planning process for the Cannington Education District in 1998-99.³⁹ At the time, public education in WA was undergoing a process of rationalisation through the establishment of senior campuses.⁴⁰ Once established the new college set out to develop a range of programs and strategies to build positive relationships with students and the community within a collaborative environment. YBC encourages students to achieve their best through 'teamwork, innovation and challenge'.



- 37 Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the heart*. New York: Continuum; and Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge of care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- 38 Maddington Senior High School opened in 1987.
- 39 Dodd, J. & Davies, D. (2002). *Community health needs study: Phase two*, City of Gosnells, Available from <http://www.gosnells.wa.gov.au/upload/gosnells/69E25BEFE8B4428984D9805B8FBB0190.pdf>
- 40 Boland, T., & Cavanagh, R.F. (2001). *Evaluation of school restructuring intended to create a middle schooling culture*, Paper presented at the 2001 Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education retrieved 14 October 2010 from <http://www.aare.edu.au/01pap/bol01137.htm>

2.3 Demographic profile

The Maddington-Kenwick area, from which YBC draws its students, is very diverse. It has a distinctly multicultural demographic and is typically described as a low SES school community.

The City of Gosnells (the local government area in which YBC is located) *Community Health Needs Study*⁴¹ found the following factors contributed to educational risk:

- stressful family environments
- drug and alcohol use in the family
- poor social supports
- parenting issues
- bullying
- low literacy of parents
- intergenerational unemployment
- cultural inappropriateness of school structures and curriculum
- high family mobility
- truancy.

By any measure, YBC has a remarkable concentration of students who face complex and challenging circumstances. This makes it a unique student cohort. To compound matters, most students in the area who wish to pursue TEE pathways ('the academic kids') in the public system choose not to go to YBC because, as a middle school, it would require the student to start at a new school in Year 11, something many families and students are reluctant to do. In the words of one senior officer, "those [students] with any academic ability whatsoever left, they went elsewhere". Approximately only 20% of the students in the intake area for YBC actually attend the college. These families are most likely to have limited choices available to them in terms of transferring their children. This is reflected in the college's school fees collection rate which is only 30-35%, thus putting additional financial constraints on the activities of the college.

Since 2007 approximately one third of the student cohort has come from non-feeder schools. This is largely explained by the college's highly personalised approach to student engagement and its success

in negotiating with students and families. As a consequence, students who do not 'fit in' at traditional high schools (section 1.3) or are 'pushed out' find themselves at YBC. Many of these students also come as 'referrals' from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Department of Child Protection (DCP) and the Canning District Education Office. As a consequence, "you've got a different cohort, you've got a difficult cohort of children because they have selected themselves out of the mainstream system" (senior officer). There is an ongoing tension for YBC between wanting to provide an education for those students that traditional high schools either reject or cannot serve and not wanting to be seen as a 'dumping ground' for all the 'problem students' who are excluded from other schools. Seeing the college as a 'dumping ground' did not go unchallenged as one school leader explained:

I ruffled a few feathers at the beginning of this year because we were getting people from all over the metro area who had heard what a good school we were for disengaged kids (for example from Joondalup [40 kms away], from Gooseberry Hill, from Armadale), trying to enrol young people who couldn't go to any other school and I just said, "We're only a small school, we can't take every student who doesn't fit in", and we just can't.

A senior officer expressed similar concerns:

When I first saw that proposal which was to locate, co-locate at Yule Brook some other things that were to do with catering for kids with behaviour problems in various ways I opposed it because I thought that the Big Picture model was doing something about a viable educational model for the kids in a community and [therefore, should] not be treated as such, okay, yes, we can see how it is a good model for behaviour kids, you know we can deal with it only in that category, we can't deal with it as another way of doing schooling, so I resisted any attempt to turn Yule Brook into some sort of co-location of bits and pieces of funny kids all being put there and then you could justify it, be small and they can do Big Picture because it works for, you know, the naughty kids and you can only have small numbers of naughty kids, that to me was just like... [abdicating] any responsibility for actually looking at alternative ways of doing schooling for low SES kids, ... so I saw it is a step backwards.

41 See <http://www.gosnells.wa.gov.au/scripts/viewurlist.asp?NID=3913>

There are many students, however, who deliberately choose YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS Big Picture programs because of the colleges' reputation in successfully engaging students in meaningful learning and career preparation. (senior officer)

One school leader explained that, "We want to be a school for all young people in our local area, not just those with problems". So there was a view that Big Picture is not only for the 'problem' kids but all students including the 'academically talented'.

The college also has a strong gender imbalance. As at 22 October 2010 there were 50 girls and 113 boys enrolled, due largely to the presence of the Football Academy run by the Clontarf Foundation. Thirty nine boys participate in this program. For a metropolitan high school it has a very high percentage (36%) of Aboriginal students.

2.4 'Troubled' times

Whether speaking to teachers, school leaders, administrators or parents or trawling through various pieces of school data, it is clear that YBC in the early years was a struggling school. The issues are familiar for schools in low SES communities and Aboriginal communities:

- high levels of student disengagement and absenteeism;
- higher incidences of mental health and behavioural issues amongst students;
- low levels of literacy and numeracy;
- low levels of parental engagement; and
- lack of an achievement culture with high aspirations for academic success.⁴²

These conditions lead to a range of 'troubles', among them:

- acts of violence and police interventions;
- adversarial relations with parents;
- non-compliance and high levels of student suspension; and
- high levels of teacher stress, absenteeism and turnover.

Listening to the voices of teachers and school leaders we gain a greater appreciation of the damaging nature of this kind of school culture on the personal-professional lives of those most intimately involved. Prior to implementation of the school reform process

under examination in this study, school personnel reported:

In an 18 month period, I had to physically disarm students of lethal weapons on eight separate occasions, so police interventions, arrests ... we had an emergency system put into the front office.... It was pretty dire. (school leader)

By 2006 we were actually operating at a level of around 400 days suspension per year, with only 185 students in the three year levels which is a very high ratio compared with most other schools.... [and] a significantly high level of parental complaints and non engagement. (school leader)

At that point of time [2001] the kids were just out of control, teachers were not respected, no work was left, we couldn't walk out of this area without locking every single door, we could not leave classrooms open, I'd have teachers coming back into the classroom, into the office crying because kids have been giving them a hard time, swearing at them, parents were even worse with support of the school, the school didn't have a good reputation in the community... (teacher)

I had a number of people tell me not to take up the appointment [at YBC]. And I'm not just talking about other colleagues that I was working with, I'm talking about people in the system saying that there was a lot of violence here, that I'd get really burnt, that I was really setting myself up for some problems, and they were worried about my safety here... (school leader)

When I first came here to Maddington, people laughed when I told them I was going to Maddington and I wondered why. (teacher)

[O]ur principal at the time got punched out by one of our Year 9 boys, ... so that was kind of the last straw for everybody really. It was a real shock to everybody I think, and from that point on we were always looking, looking for what we can do, what can we change, there's got to be something out there that'll work for these kids. (school leader)

Clearly, YBC faced significant challenges. There was no quick fix or prescriptions to follow. Rather it would require commitment, imagination and hope from all staff in determining how to turn these difficulties into possibility.⁴³

42 Hamilton, P. (2009). *Developments at Yule Brook College: An opinion*. Perth: Department of Education. Unpublished paper.

43 Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the heart*. New York: Continuum; and Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge of care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press, p. 64.

2.5 Searching for answers

To begin, the college introduced a range of innovative programs to meet the needs of different groups of students, among them:

- Getting it Right (Numeracy and Literacy)
- Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Assistance Scheme
- Classroom Management and Instructional Skills (CMIS)
- Cooperative Learning
- single gender classrooms
- Dare to Lead
- First Steps and Stepping Out
- Restorative Justice
- Follow the Dream
- family links
- Structured Workplace Learning/Workplace Learning
- Vocational Education and Training
- Learning Through Internships
- rural skills at Hillside Farm
- community service
- Youth Pathways/Jobs West
- Yorgaz Girls' program
- No Dole program
- in-school suspension
- protective behaviours
- Good Lovin' with Yirra Yaakin
- Seasons for Growth
- Class Observation and Peer Support
- The Sound Way Literacy program
- Passports
- Chess intervention
- Youth Inspired Experiential Leadership Development program
- Courses of Study
- Skills for Everyday Life (SELf)
- Leading Effective Learning and Teaching
- strong mentor engagement programs

As one school leader commented:

... when the school was first established, ... teachers tried different pedagogical approaches ... it was very much like it was a laboratory for trying these things. And things came and went as people came and went and nothing stuck. (school leader, emphasis added)

Nonetheless, these programs served a number of functions. They provided opportunities for different groups of students to be engaged in a range of short term programs, the college was able to access additional resources (funds) to explore innovative strategies, and it provided staff with a chance to talk about issues of student engagement. In other words, these programs in different ways helped the college to achieve some 'really good things' (school coach) and in the case of Restorative Justice and Learning through Internships, these became integral to the college's future design plans (see section 2.6).

Despite the best endeavours of staff, however, none of these programs in isolation was going to bring about the kind of shift in school culture that was necessary. As one teacher explained, "We knew what we'd done was not getting through". YBC's Big Picture school coach summed up the situation based on his conversations with school leaders, "We've still got violence, we've still got poor attendance, we've still got low interest in numeracy, there's been no breakthrough here". As one school leader stated, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result, so we knew we had to change".



2.6 Creating a new vision

If YBC was going to succeed, then it had to find an alternative whole school change strategy. It needed a circuit breaker that would allow teachers, students and community to think anew about what's possible, rather than what is. This came with the conscious decision of staff to attend a Big Picture Education workshop conducted in Perth. This was a defining moment in a journey of cultural, pedagogical, structural and organisational transformation. After hearing about Big Picture Education Australia (see section 2.7) and the kinds of descriptors, structure and support available, there was an immediate resonance for the staff. It reflected the college's own experiences and what they had been struggling with for some time. As one school leader explained, "We sat there basically ticking the boxes".

At this point, the college principal decided to take some of his staff on a hosted visit to the Met Big Picture School in Providence, Rhode Island, USA. Those who participated reflected on the importance of this experience in terms of the college's renewal process:

I think one of the best things we took away is we can do this, and we can do a pretty good job of this. I think we all went into those schools and went, yeah, we can do this and take it further, and that was important in making a success of what's happening now. (teacher)

... it wasn't that they [teachers] went off and looked at schools by themselves, they ... were having conversations with Australian and American Big Picture people, ... almost like a workshop where you've got the school there as your evidence [about what works]. (Big Picture school coach)



Big Picture was a significant catalyst for change because it brought together lots of things that people believed in. I guess I was fortunate in that the particular team that I focused on to implement it was a very strong and collaborative team. (school leader)

And it was only really when a few of us decided let's just embrace its smallness [YBC], take advantage of what we've got. Like we've got kids who are difficult to work with, let's accept that because if we made this place any bigger it would be really, almost impossible to work in. (school leader)

Following the trip, YBC developed a comprehensive and manageable set of design principles to guide its work with students and the community. The focus was on:

- small by design and the power of one on one in Advisory groups
- personalised learning that pursues student passions
- families and community – grow a culture
- learning through internships and authentic assessment – make it real.⁴⁴



Founded on the principle of 'one student at a time' YBC has identified two key priorities for the period 2009-2012:

1. Personalised curriculum

- The school develops a learning environment in which each student's needs are well known by teachers;
- Learning plans are developed with students and caregivers to reflect these needs; and
- Students are supported to identify their learning needs and styles, and to discover and learn through their interests and passions.

2. Real world connection

- Parents are partners in their child's learning; Students regularly demonstrate accountability for their progress to parents, teachers and their peers through public exhibitions;
- Opportunities are provided for students to apply their learning beyond the school; and
- Students are encouraged to use their learning to make a community contribution.⁴⁵



These priorities have been described, mapped and explained in a comprehensive Plan of Progression, 2011-2014. Underpinning this strategic approach to school improvement is a set of design principles and indicators to guide the college over the next four years. By way of summary, these design principles are:

- Personalisation
- Adult world immersion
- Academic rigour
- Family and community engagement
- Authentic assessment
- TAFE/university/employment bound
- Teacher and team development
- Planning for Year 11 and 12.⁴⁶

In the words of one senior officer, "If all schools did this, really assessed their current situation, really looked at alternatives and what was out there, matched that with what they needed to provide for their kids, and then implemented it in a staged and effective way, I think we'd all be doing quite well actually".

2.7 Small schools, big ideas

Yule Brook College and the smaller Big Picture programs at Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS draw on the principles and design features of Big Picture USA. Big Picture Education (BPE) schools are defined by their commitment to educate 'one student at a time' in a community of learners. Underpinning this approach is the belief that each student has a unique set of interests, needs, and capabilities around which personalised learning plans are designed. Each student co-jointly designs their own learning plan with the support of parents, professional mentors and advisors. The key to success in BPE schools lies in fostering students' individual passions, encouraging active ownership of the learning process, and developing the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real life experience and challenges.

Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) is a not-for-profit organisation that works to catalyse change in education by generating and sustaining innovative, personalised schools that work in tandem with community organisations, businesses, and government and non-government agencies. The BPE school design was developed by Elliot Washor and Dennis Littky when setting up the Metropolitan Career and Technology School (The Met) in Providence, Rhode Island in the 1990s.⁴⁷ They have since created Big Picture Learning that has now established over 80 BPE schools in over 20 states in the USA and worldwide. They had previously worked with the US Coalition of Essential Schools that is based on the research and ideas of Ted Sizer. Most aspects of the BPE design have been explored over the last twenty years in Australian schools under the auspices of the



45 Yule Brook College (2010). *Annual report, 2009*.

46 Yule Brook College (2010). *Plan of progression, 2011*.

47 Littky, D., with Grabelle, S. (2004). *The big picture: Education is everyone's business*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. See also Levine, E. (2002). *One kid at a time: Big lessons from a small school*. New York: Teachers College Press. Both books provide a comprehensive account of Big Picture Education philosophy and practice as it relates to student engagement and learning.

Australian National Schools Network (ANSN). BPEA evolved from the ANSN and is working in close collaboration with US colleagues.

Big Picture Education is underpinned by a number of key assumptions about how to improve student engagement for learning:

Schools must be small enough to encourage the development of a community of learners, and to allow for each child to be known well by at least one adult. School staff and leaders must be visionaries and life-long learners. Schools must connect students, and the school, to the community - both by sending students out to learn from mentors in the real world, and by allowing the school itself to serve the needs of the local community. Finally, schools actively facilitate admission to, and success in, tertiary education. School staff members work closely with students, families, and colleges throughout (and beyond) the tertiary application process, to ensure that tertiary education is attainable for all Big Picture students.

The Big Picture approach is founded on the belief that true learning takes place when:

- each student is an active participant in his or her education
- the student's course of study is personalised by teachers, parents and mentors who know him or her well, and
- school-based learning is blended with outside experiences that heighten the student's interest.⁴⁸



Whilst none of this is radically new to classroom practitioners, what is unique is the manner in which BPE ties these elements together into a coherent philosophy and practice. Put another way, it actually walks the talk. So what are these pedagogical principles? BPE schools are distinguished by the use of the same language and practice. All BPE schools share common characteristics that are called 'distinguishers' (or principles). The distinguishers exist as a comprehensive whole. They are interrelated and inform one another. Consequently, no distinguisher is more important than another and none work in isolation. It is the combination of the distinguishers, the degree to which BPE schools employ them, and the intensive conversations of reflection and action around them that makes the design unique. These distinguishers are as follows⁴⁹:

1. Academic rigour: 'Head, heart and hand'
2. Learning in the community
3. One student at a time
4. Authentic assessment
5. Collaboration for learning
6. Learning in Advisory
7. Trust, respect and care
8. Everyone's a leader
9. Families are enrolled too
10. Creating futures
11. Teachers and leaders are learners too
12. Diverse and enduring partnerships.

48 Big Picture Education Australia (2009). *The big picture, one student at a time, briefing paper*. Developed in conjunction with Gerrard Brown, p.4.

49 Big Picture Education Australia (2010), *School research framework*. Big Picture Education: Melbourne. This document provides a detailed elaboration of each distinguisher and the five key Learning Goals—empirical reasoning; quantitative reasoning (numeracy); communication; social reasoning; and personal qualities.

School leaders are very clear about the role of Big Picture Education in bringing coherence to their school:

If you try and run a Big Picture school without taking all of those distinguishers into account then they fall down... if one or more of them is missing or a bit defunct, then it brings the whole thing down. (school leader)

Big Picture [has] grown out of lots of different things that people have tried over a long period of time and really just bundled it together in this pretty neat package. (school leader)

I think what we've done is given everybody a chance to be on the same page in terms of where we're headed with the kids and to have a say in what's going on in the school. (school leader)



Big Picture Education Australia is a part of a much larger school reform movement that has been underway in the USA for well over two decades and was recently affirmed by President Obama and Secretary Duncan with the announcement of Grad Nation, a ten year plan to address the crisis of student disengagement from schooling. The small school reform movement is galvanised around the work of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) Project funded by the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation.⁵¹

By way of summary, the key elements informing Big Picture Education are summarised in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Big Picture School Snapshot – What and Why? ⁵⁰

Key Elements	Big Picture school 'snapshot'	Benefits
1. Highly personalised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small classes: 17 students per class Small schools: maximum of 150 students Daily one-on-one help from teacher Customised curriculum and highly personalised approach for each student Flexible learning spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High levels of student engagement High attendance rates Improved learning outcomes Very high graduation rates
2. Adult world immersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two days of industry internships each week Authentic and meaningful work Academically rigorous Inquiry driven learning No exams – Students build portfolios and defend their work at exhibitions each quarter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Immediately useful skills Greater connection to the workforce High employment rates after school Development of industry mentors in areas of interest to the young person
3. Community connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong connections with community Parents are partners in their child's education Parents are panelists at their child's quarterly exhibitions School as a community resource 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents engaged in their children's education and can impact school culture 'Social capital' benefits for the school, the family and the community
4. Smooth post-secondary transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aim for all students to graduate and continue into higher learning Higher-ed opportunities in all four years. Most students take at least one tertiary course College Transition Team assists in student placement and supports transition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very high rates of acceptance into tertiary education institutions High tertiary education completion and graduation rates
5. Intellectual rigour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on both critical and creative thinking Meets or exceeds state / territory education standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong numeracy, literacy and reasoning skills Creative and independent thinkers All young people guaranteed tertiary entry

⁵⁰ Big Picture Education Australia (2009). *The big picture, one student at a time, briefing paper*. Developed in conjunction with Gerrard Brown, p.5.

⁵¹ See Toch, T. (2003). *High schools on a human scale: How small schools can transform American education*. Boston: Beacon Press; Strike, K. (2010). *Small schools and strong communities: A third way of school reform*. New York: Teachers College Press; and Meier, D. (2002). *In schools we trust: Creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization*. Boston: Beacon Press.

The CES has built a robust network of over fifty schools that use the CES Common Principles to set the priorities and design practices to meet the needs of their students, families and communities. These common principles are based on decades of research and practice and include⁵²:

- learning to use one’s mind well
- less is more, depth over coverage
- goals apply to all students
- personalisation
- student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach
- demonstration of mastery
- a tone of decency and trust
- commitment to the entire school
- resources dedicated to teaching and learning
- democracy and equity.

The CES Small Schools Network (CES SSN) has established a series of Mentor Schools, “A peer-to-peer model that builds on and codifies the process that successful CES small schools have developed over the Coalition’s history”. It is a very successful model of professional learning to support like schools in various stages of development. Furthermore, “This attention, grooming, and constant inspiration has created an environment that stimulates rapid growth, instils best practices, and supplies the endurance needed to transform our schools and the systems on which they depend”.⁵³ Given the demonstrated achievements⁵⁴ in terms of the outcomes advocated by the Smarter Schools National Partnership Agreements in Australia (see section 1.6), it is indeed surprising that the lessons have been largely ignored by policymakers and senior administrators in Western Australia.

In this context, YBC appears to be ahead of its time in terms of school based innovation in Western Australia. What’s happening at YBC has not gone unnoticed by local, national and international visitors interested in finding out about the college’s approach to student engagement in low SES school communities.

In 2009-10, YBC hosted a range of individuals and institutions wanting to observe and talk with teachers about their work, amongst them:

- Michael Hall, principal from Erindale College, Victoria
- local area primary teachers and principals
- principal and teachers from Yea SHS, Victoria
- teachers and administrators from South Australia, Victoria and NSW including the regional director from Orange in NSW and TAFE personnel
- director general of education and senior education personnel, Peru
- senior education department official, Fiji
- St Catherine’s College, UWA
- staff from Melville SHS, Thornlie SHS, Manjimup SHS, Balga SHS, Belmont SHS
- Phil Paioff, Dare to Lead Australia
- Peter Hamilton, WA Department of Education
- academic staff, Curtin University.
- Elliot Washor, US director of Big Picture Education
- Viv White, CEO of BPE Australia
- Cathy Wish-Wilson, teacher and Hardy Fellowship winner, Tasmania.

52 Benitez, M., Davidson, J., & Flaxman, L. (2009). *Small schools, big ideas: The essential guide to successful school transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp.319-321.

53 Benitez, M., Davidson, J., & Flaxman, L. (2009), p. xix; See also Darling-Hammond, L. (2001). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. Both books provide a comprehensive description of the conditions that need to be created to transform schools to ensure academic success for every student.

54 Key findings from three recent studies conducted on CES schools in Boston, New York and Minnesota demonstrate the positive impact of CES principles on students’ intellectual and social growth and development. These studies’ multiple measures include traditional test data, college-going rates, retention rates, drop-out rates, along with measures of student engagement, self-esteem, problem-solving ability and mental health. Details of these studies are available from Benitez, M., Davidson, J., & Flaxman, L. (2009), pp. 343-348. Further data on student performance at CES schools can be found at <http://www.ceschangelab.org>. See also Day, N (2010). *Big picture schools in California: An analysis of outcomes using California Department of Education “Data Quest” information retrieval service*. Melbourne: Centre for Program Evaluation Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne; and Wasley, P., Fine, M., Gladden, M., Holland, E., King, P., Mosak, E., & Powell, L. (2000). *Small schools: Great strides*. New York: Bank Street College of Education. This data is consistent with early evidence about the improved performance of students at YBC on a range of academic, social and emotional indicators. This evidence will be examined in section 3 of this report.

Furthermore, the college has been widely recognised through a number of awards such as:

- Dare to Lead 2009
- Norm Hyde Award 2009
- shortlisted for Innovative School Award 2010 (in the top four)
- shortlisted for Numeracy Award 2010 (in the top four)
- invited to prepare a brief for the minister of education on becoming a distinctive specialty school 2009
- Gosnells City Council awards, where YBC won every secondary award provided by Gosnells City Council in 2008
- Canning District Teaching in Excellence award – awarded to the whole school on the basis of significant change to pedagogy by all staff. It was the only school in the Canning District to achieve this in 2009.



In the section to follow, we shall attempt to identify and describe some of the key elements that appear to be enhancing student engagement for learning at YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS. This discussion will be organised around five key themes emerging from the interviews with participants – relationships, pedagogy, community, school structure, and public policy.⁵⁵



55 This framework draws on previous research in low SES high schools in the Fremantle-Peel Education District. See Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008), Chapter 8 Profile of conditions supporting school retention and student engagement in secondary schooling: A summary, pp. 129-138. See also Hayes, D., Mills, M., Christie, P., & Lingard, B. (2006). *Teachers and schooling making a difference: Productive pedagogies, assessment and performance*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

3.0 Student engagement for learning

3.1 Relationships

3.1.1 Why is this issue important?

Relationships refer to those broader sets of values, dispositions, beliefs, assumptions and behaviours that need to be created and more widely sustained to engage students in learning. To put it most simply, there is 'no education without relation'.⁵⁶ Whether school works well for young people seems to depend very much on the quality of the relationships within the school. The evidence shows that 'when young people cannot, or do not, form a relationship in school with at least one adult or with peers, then they disconnect, disengage and 'drop out' of school'.⁵⁷ From the point of view of students, their requirements are minimal. 'Students want respect from their teacher; they want classroom pedagogy relevant to their interests; and they want a teacher with enthusiasm and openness.'⁵⁸



George Wood, principal of Federal Hocking High School in Ohio explains how:

*High school can have an impact on the lives of our children if we structure our schools so that adolescents are in close connection with their teachers – teachers who know what matters to their students, what strikes their interest, what would take them beyond the routine.*⁵⁹

Staff at YBC understand this message well and have put in place a range of strategies to make sure it happens (see sections 2.6 and 2.7).

So to me this place is now a safe place for these kids, they enjoy coming here, the relationships are a big thing at this school [YBC] it's huge at this school, I think our whole thing revolves around the relationships that the teachers have with the students and the students have with us. (year team leader)

I've got a letter from DCP written to us after one young man's family moved, just praising the school, not just for our treatment of him, but for being a school that stands out amongst all other schools in the way that they deal with the kids and agencies. (school leader)

At Manjimup SHS the story is the same:

Relationships are everything. Above all, they [kids] want to connect with people... I think they've got to go away thinking that person at that place or that time in my life, as far as education goes, people care. (teacher)

The intimacy. The one on one; she's treated like an adult here and not like a kid. There's no, as I said, bullying, and just acceptance and she can do [work] at her own pace, and she's learning a lot more here in the last four months than, I think in the last couple of years at the mainstream school. (parent)

They [students] feel as though someone wants them to be here, they feel as though someone's got their back, they feel as though if there's an issue even if they don't communicate it that someone will help them because they can see that they are distressed or upset or they are having difficulties with another teacher or class work or something like that. Someone who is there for them even though it might not be formally set, I guess. (teacher)



56 Bingham, C. & Sidorkin, A. (Eds.) (2004). *No education without relation*. New York: Peter Lang.

57 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008), p.21; Smyth, J., & Hattam, R. (2004). *'Dropping out,' drifting off, being excluded: Becoming somebody without school*. New York: Peter Lang.

58 Margonis, F. (2004). From student resistance to educative engagement: A case study in building powerful student-teacher relationships. In C. Bingham & A. Sidorkin, (Eds.). *No education without relation* (pp.39-53). New York: Peter Lang, p. 51.

59 Wood, G. (2005). *Time to learn: How to create high schools that serve all students*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, p. 56.

3.1.2 What works?

Intuitively we already know what works for teachers, students and parents. 'Relational schools', as we describe them, share a number of things:

*The values of respect, trust and care are dominant features of the 'relational school'. In such a school there is a continual focusing on the diverse and complex emotional needs of students and their families. Teachers recognise the importance of creating small learning communities, high quality relationships and strong transition support for students through the various phases of schooling.*⁶⁰

At YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS at any given moment you will see evidence of some or all of the following relational elements contributing to student engagement in learning.⁶¹

- **Teachers valuing students:** Teachers are willing to listen to students, accommodate their lives and experiences and treat them with respect.
- **Students are treated like adults:** Students appreciate teachers who relate to them as people and negotiate norms of acceptable conduct rather than falling back on their institutional authority.
- **Taking care of students:** There is a continual focusing on the diverse and complex needs of students and families.
- **De-institutionalising relationships:** The emphasis is on building relational trust in the form of exchanges that bring with them respect, personal regard for others, competence and integrity.
- **Consistency and stability:** The school works towards consistency and stability of both staffing and the core values and practices of school life.
- **Engaged learning:** The school acknowledges that students must be actively involved in decisions about what they learn and how.
- **Extra-curricular activities:** Students are provided with after-school programs including artistic, sporting, recreational and social activities that build a greater sense of identity and connectedness to the school.



- **Listening to student voice:** Students themselves feel they are listened to, respected and treated as young adults.
- **Challenging stereotypes:** The school is willing to challenge deficit views of students, their families and their communities (see section 1.3).

At YBC these elements are specifically described in Big Picture Education distinguisher No. 7, 'Trust, respect and care', which reads as follows:

School culture is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. One of the things that is striking about Big Picture schools is the ease with which students interact with adults. There is a culture of trust, respect and care between students and adults, as well as among themselves. Everyone is greeted and welcomed every morning.

A strong sense of community is deliberately developed in a Big Picture school. People have fun together, work hard together, with a shared primary purpose around learning. There are high expectations for everyone learning in the community.

Diversity is honoured, and inequity is challenged. Problems are named, and worked through respectfully. Reflection is a

key aspect of everything everyone does.

Students are encouraged to take leadership roles in the school and student voice is valued in decision-making processes in Advisory, the year group and the whole school.

For the adults in Big Picture schools, teamwork is a defining aspect of the culture. Principals create regular opportunities for professional development and learning together. Staff members reflect regularly and share ideas through a weekly reflection, often called Thank God It's Friday (TGIF). Additionally, staff members meet regularly in a variety of configurations (whole staff, year level, buddies, etc).⁶²

60 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2010), 'Hanging in with Kids' in tough times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage in the relational school. New York: Peter Lang, p.201.

61 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008), 'Hanging in with Kids' in tough times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage. School of Education: University of Ballarat, pp.131-132.

62 Big Picture Education Australia (2010), *School research framework*. Big Picture Education, Melbourne, p.35.

The focus by staff on building relationships with students is augmented by the attention given to promoting good relationships between students, between teachers and parents, between students and parents and between the school and its broader community (see section 3.3). YBC does not see this kind of relational culture in isolation from pedagogy, community, school structure and policy. It is integral to all aspects of school life. Indeed, this is the key strength and learning from the YBC experience. It has managed to develop a coherent pedagogical approach founded on trust, respect and care that permeates everything that happens in and outside of the college.

3.1.3 What is the evidence?

When these conditions are brought into existence, we should hardly be surprised to find evidence of enhanced student performance on a range of indicators related to behaviour, relationships, attendance and motivation. For example, in Figure 2 below, YBC students rate (on a scale of 1 never to 5 always) their own improved attitudes towards school (Q5, 6, & 7), teachers (Q8, 10 & 11), family (Q9 & 23), attendance (Q19) and learning (Q12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 & 18).

Figure 2: Comparison of Yule Brook College to Other Schools 2010 – Current Students
Averaged scores, 5 being all the time. (n=96)⁶³

	YBC	School prior to YBC
Q 5 I felt good about going to school.	3.93	2.98
Q 6 I liked being there.	3.98	2.96
Q 7 I felt I belonged at school.	4.04	3.11
Q 8 I got along well with my teachers.	4.38	3.12
Q 9 I got on well with my family.	4.38	3.88
Q 10 Teachers took the time to get to know me.	4.38	2.91
Q 11 I was treated fairly.	4.29	3.12
Q 12 I could focus on my work.	4.05	3.08
Q 13 I got help with my work.	4.29	2.98
Q 14 I could learn/understand new things.	4.13	3.04
Q 15 My teachers explained things to me.	4.51	3.15
Q 16 I produced a lot of work.	4.12	3.09
Q 17 The quality and level of my work was good.	4.11	3.05
Q 18 I could keep up with my learning.	4.21	3.16
Q 19 I attended school.	4.42	3.54
Q 20 I found it difficult to get on with my work.	2.51	3.05
Q 21 I planned for my future.	4.02	2.63
Q 22 I felt good about myself.	4.20	3.26
Q 23 My family had noticed an improvement in me.	3.67	3.15
Q 24 My in class behaviour was good.	4.11	3.10
Q 25 I got into trouble.	2.26	3.11
Q 26 I used to get to class late.	2.31	2.67
Q 27 I used to “take off”/truant during the day.	1.58	2.06
Q 28 I broke school rules.	2.04	2.83
Q 29 It was easy to ‘do the right thing’.	4.05	3.09

63 Yule Brook College (2010). *Yule Brook College Current Student Survey*, 2010

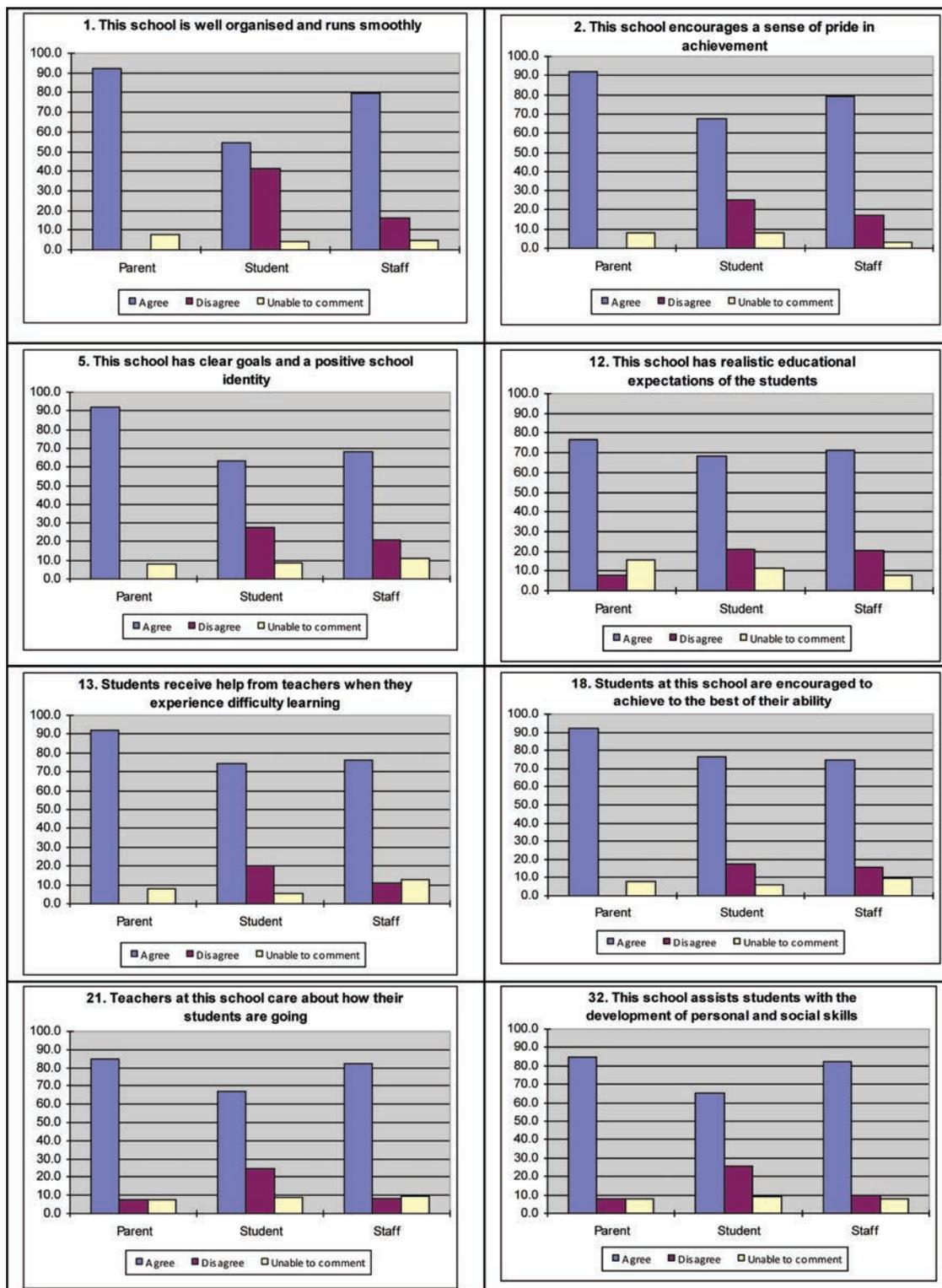
On a national self-assessment survey of Big Picture schools and programs, YBC reported a 'noticeable improvement' on the following data clusters:

- retention
- daily attendance
- discipline issues
- suspension/exclusion rate

- engagement in learning
- completion of tasks and
- engagement in the life of the school.⁶⁴

Positive relationships with parents and students are also illustrated in response to a range of survey questions in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Relationships with Parents and Students at YBC, 2009⁶⁵



64 Bonner, C. (2010). *Big Picture national survey—individual school responses*. Melbourne: Big Picture Education Australia.

65 Yule Brook College (2010). *Annual Report, 2009*.

In 2010, a survey of parents and students reported even more positive responses to the question of how they feel about their school⁶⁶:

For parents

- 100% of parents feel that there is an adult at YBC who is actively interested in their child.
- 94% of parents believe that their child can achieve their personal and academic potential at YBC.
- 89% of parents describe their child as happy and content at YBC.
- 94% of parents feel included in their child's learning.

For students

- 96% of students feel that there is an adult at YBC who is actively interested in them.
- 96% of students believe that they can achieve their academic potential at YBC.
- 91% of students feel that they are developing strong friendships at YBC.
- 96% of students describe themselves as happy and content at YBC.

Anecdotal evidence from school leaders, teachers, parents and visitors confirms the importance of relationships to school success:

So, at this point, it certainly is the best it's ever been, and it's great to have been here over such a period of time and seen such constant change. Reflecting on Big Picture, it's the best atmosphere that the school has ever had, certainly. (year team leader)

We know they're not getting behaviour slips [record of misbehaviour], they're not getting in trouble, they're not getting suspended. We know their parents are happier when they talk to us, we know the kids are happier. (school leader)

Well, when you go in there and have a conversation with anybody, the philosophy, the ethical code is different. And that is what it looks at, it's a child oriented philosophy. We're looking at what the child can do, we're looking at his good points and

it's been more inclusive in terms of the way you can talk to him. You can say here is a child who's having difficulties, these are his traumas, this is what's happening for the child, this is the sort of support he needs.... the school said, yeah, I think we can do that. (senior officer)

I was excited about coming in [for the interview] because I've always been worried what would happen if this school [YBC] stopped the program [Big Picture] because like I said, I can see the benefit for so many different children. (parent)

Jess [pseudonym] still refers to YBC time as 'being part of a family'. She would leave Sevenoaks to return to YBC for Year 11/12 even if it meant repeating Year 11. Jess admired her teachers at YBC and regarded them as friends. (parent)

Albeit they [YBC] also have the most difficult kids and in particular their current year 9 cohort has some really tricky characters who, prior to going to Yule Brook, would have caused the system immense problems, and yet at Yule Brook they've been more settled, the families have been more on side and happy to work with schools than they've ever been before. (senior officer)

In my capacity as Dare to Lead state consultant, I regularly take professional groups from Western Australia, Australia and internationally (ie Peruvian Delegation in 2009) to visit Yule Brook College as an example of best (holistic) educational practices. Although my focus area is Aboriginal education, it is evident that the innovative pedagogical practices, approaches to community relations and open/welcoming staff (including the front office and non-teaching staff), has left a major impression on all those who visit the school. Furthermore, the physical environment is enhanced by the Aboriginal artworks, community cultural area and no signs of graffiti ... reflecting a warm, inviting and 'great place to learn' school. (Dr Philip Paioff, 27 July 2010)

The school feels like a big family. Small classes means that students get the attention that they need. Teachers are all friendly and want the best for the kids.⁶⁷ (student teacher)

66 Yule Brook College (2010). *In the picture*, Nov-Dec, 2010, p.10

67 Comment from a survey of 2009 Curtin University Teacher Education Students at YBC.

3.2 Pedagogy

3.2.1 Why is this issue important?

Pedagogy refers to all those practices that affect what and how students learn, and how teachers teach.⁶⁸ “In pedagogically engaged schools teachers generate learning experiences that are connected, challenging, rigorous and (in the words of students) fun. Typically, these schools are success orientated, innovative and responsive to students’ passions and interests. Importantly, they recognise that one size does not fit all students.”⁶⁹ When quality teaching and learning of this kind is apparent, then students are more likely to engage in learning and be successful.⁷⁰

3.2.2 What works?

When we look at the research evidence about student engagement and what works the following elements typically appear. By way of summary:⁷¹

- **Ownership of learning:** Students are active participants in negotiating their own learning within consistent frameworks and structures.
 - **Authentic assessment and reporting:** Students learn best when assessment and feedback is relevant, ongoing and embedded in the real world.
 - **Youth and popular culture:** The school curriculum connects to the realities of students’ lives, experiences, language and culture.
 - **Cooperative and collaborative learning:** The school fosters learning communities that are collaborative in nature, purpose and processes.
 - **Resilience – working against the odds:** The school understands how the cultural processes of educational inequality operate and is committed to giving all students a fair go.
 - **Critical literacies:** Beyond the goal of functional literacy, the school promotes the acquisition of critical literacies to help students become active and engaged citizens pursuing socially worthwhile projects.
- **Curriculum to fit the child:** The school recognises that one size does not fit all. Within the constraints of time and resources, educational programs are tailored to meet the needs and aspirations of students. This involves a willingness on the part of school leaders and teachers to run with students’ ideas and to entertain a degree of flexibility in curriculum planning.
 - **Success-orientated:** The school provides every student with an opportunity to not only pursue their passions and interests, but also to demonstrate their accomplishments. Students receive recognition of, and accreditation for, out-of-school learning including work experience, community service and participation in extra-curricular activities.
 - **Relevant and rigorous:** Teachers appreciate that the curriculum should not only be relevant and socially worthwhile, but also challenging, rigorous and fun. Standards are high and the pedagogical structure is explicit.



68 Johnson, B. & Reid, A. (Eds.) (1991). *Contesting the curriculum*. Katoomba: Social Science Press, p. ix.

69 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2010), ‘*Hanging in with Kids*’ in *tough times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage in the relational school*. New York: Peter Lang, p.203.

70 Hayes, D., Mills, M., Christie, P., & Lingard, B. (2006). *Teachers and schooling making a difference: Productive pedagogies, assessment and performance*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

71 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008), ‘*Hanging in with Kids*’ in *tough times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage*. School of Education: University of Ballarat, pp.134-136.

At YBC, these teaching and learning elements are integrated through Big Picture Education distinguishers. For purposes of illustration, distinguisher No. 1, 'Academic rigour: Head, heart and hand', explains how:

BPE Schools have a deep intellectual purpose for each and every student. Students are continually challenged to deepen their learning and improve their performance across all learning goals. Significant pieces of academic work are required for Year 12 graduation and high standards are expected of all students.

The learning goals give coherence to the whole curriculum. All stakeholders – no matter what their role – help the students develop their capacities in these goals. The learning goals cut across all subjects and interests. They do not distinguish between academic and vocational pathways. Students relate their activities back to the learning goals. Everyone in the school can articulate these goals and relate what they are doing to how it is helping them learn.

The learning goals are:

- Empirical Reasoning
- Quantitative Reasoning (Numeracy)
- Communication (Literacy)
- Social Reasoning
- Personal Qualities.

Engagement with learning is achieved by getting to know the students well by understanding their language, their culture, their issues, their knowledge, skills and abilities. Students engage in collaborative hands-on and community based learning informed by actual and immediate events in their lives. In these ways BPE schools support students to develop their capabilities, disposition and confidence in order to take responsible social action and understand the connectedness between local, national and global issues.

Depth of learning – in a few areas – is achieved by having students following through on their

interests in context. In doing this, students work with experts in these interests, as well as their teacher(s). This work with experts takes place in their context (not school). This brings together the people (eg expert marine biologist), the objects (eg scientific equipment) and the place(s) (eg ocean and laboratory). Together they bring the language, the tools and the culture of that discipline to the student.

Students are taught the processes for learning and research. For example, learning how to plan a project, conduct a project, document a project and write up a project are part of the student's curriculum. All aspects of the BPE school curriculum outlined in the following distinguishers are made explicit to the students so they learn how to learn. Reflection is a key aspect of their work and built into every week, every term and every year. Public exhibition of learning is central to requiring students to articulate not just what they have done but what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Students document their work and learning in a portfolio.

Head, heart and hand—the thinking, the passion and the doing are kept connected. Students do not have to choose early in high school which pathway they are to follow. The academic work is not put in competition with the practical vocational work. All students are expected to pursue both by working in authentic contexts completing authentic tasks. This ensures that these things are inextricably linked.⁷²

Students are also helped to develop in key non-cognitive areas⁷³ such as self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, handling systems and organisations, developing long range goals, developing their leadership, developing strong adult support into post-school lives, engaging in community and being exposed to a range of non-traditional learning experiences. Research is increasingly showing how important these factors are in the future success of young people in higher learning institutions.⁷⁴

72 Rose, M (2009) Blending "hand work" and "brain work": Can multiple pathways deepen learning. In J. Oakes & M Saunders (Eds.), *Beyond tracking" Multiple pathways to college, career, and civic participation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

73 See for example, Sedlacek, W. E. (2005). The case for non-cognitive measures. In W. Camaara & E. Kimmel (Eds.), *Choosing students: Higher education admission tools for the 21st Century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

74 Big Picture Education Australia (2010). *School research framework*. Big Picture Education: Melbourne, p.25.

Aspiring to academic excellence for each and every child challenges a lot of assumptions about low SES school communities (see section 1.3). What distinguishes YBC from many other schools in low SES school communities is the manner in which it explicitly goes about the task of creating and enacting the conditions conducive to achieving this goal as evidenced by some promising data trends.⁷⁵ By emphasising high academic expectations for each and every student through the use of personalised learning plans, YBC appreciates the importance of moving beyond a deficit view of students in low SES school communities to a capabilities approach that enables them to make more powerful choices.⁷⁶ Put another way, ‘all people aspire, although socio-economic and cultural factors enable some to more powerfully pursue their aspirations than others’.⁷⁷

Pedagogically, there are two other practices at YBC that appear to be making a significant difference in terms of student engagement in learning.⁷⁸ Firstly, YBC is personalising learning through Individual Learning Plans for each and every student based on their passions and interests. This teaching and learning approach is encapsulated in the idea of ‘one student at a time’ (Big Picture Education distinguisher No. 3) and developed through Individual Learning Plans:

Every student’s work is documented in their Individual Learning Plan (ILP). This is created and updated each term with the learning team (the student, parent, Advisor, and whenever possible, mentor) in a Learning Plan Meeting. The Big Picture Learning Goals are essential to helping students achieve depth and quality in their learning. The five learning goals outline key areas of student development drawn from the whole curriculum.



There are also sets of year level expectations that help students to set goals in all areas, including literacy, leadership and personal qualities. Overall, the focus and depth of investigation in the Big Picture Learning Goals is based on the student’s individual interests, talents, and needs.

Students with ILPs follow the same process, personalised to their needs. It involves ‘doing what’s best for kids’, pushing and pulling at the right time, not dictating or punishing, but problem solving and mediating. Overall, the Advisor’s job is to know students well and to provide the right measure of challenge and support for each student in each activity to promote academic and social growth. Students are responsible for following their interests and passions in the community and in their project work.⁷⁹

Secondly, YBC is developing ‘authentic assessment’ (Big Picture Education distinguisher No. 4) practices through the use of public exhibitions. This approach reaffirms the core values of assessment in the WA Curriculum Framework⁸⁰ and what most educators already know about good assessment.⁸¹ It must be real, fair, rigorous and meaningful. When these conditions are created students are more likely to produce work of the highest standard.

75 See section 3.1 and 3.2.

76 Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality re-examined*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press;

77 Bok, J. (2010). The capacity to aspire to higher education: “It’s like making them do play without a script”. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), p.164; see also Prosser, B., McCallum, F., Comber, B., & Nixon, H. (2008). “I am smart and I am not joking”: Aiming high in the middle years of schooling. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 35(2), pp.15-35. This latter article is based on research in the Northern suburbs of Adelaide.

78 Robinson, K. & Aronica, L. (2009). *The element: How finding your passion changes everything*. New York: Viking; and Berger, R. (2003). *An ethic of excellence: Building a culture of craftsmanship with students*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

79 Big Picture Education Australia (2010), *School research framework*. Big Picture Education: Melbourne, p.30.

80 Curriculum Council (1998). *Curriculum framework for kindergarten to year 12 in Western Australia*. Perth: Curriculum Council, pp. 37-39.

81 Darling-Hammond, L., Ancess, J., & Falk, B. (1995). *Authentic assessment in action: Studies of schools and students at work*. New York; Teachers College Press; Kohn, A. (2004). *What does it mean to be well educated? And more essays on standards, grading, and other follies*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press; and Gallagher, C. (2007). *Reclaiming assessment: A better alternative to the accountability agenda*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Learning at a Big Picture school is a process that is substantiated with quality products. There are high expectations for each student at Big Picture schools. The criteria of assessment are individualised to the student and the real world standards of a project (as gauged by the mentor). Students are assessed against the learning goals, a range of non-cognitive variables and other outcomes as prescribed within the tasks, and the work.

The learning plan determines the individual standards to which the student is held accountable. This is informed by knowledge of the student's strengths and weaknesses, the specific goals attempted and expert opinions from the learning team (mentor, Advisory teacher(s), student and parent) about what quality work means for that student in that project and their work generally.

Students engaged in this process at Big Picture schools are not only assessed by tests but a range of authentic assessment tasks. The assessments at a Big Picture school include public exhibitions (one per quarter or trimester) that track growth, progress, and quality (work in the learning plan and academic depth in the Learning Goals), weekly check-in meetings with Advisors, weekly journals, annual presentation portfolios, narrative assessments and transcripts. Gateways for students' progress are between 10th and 11th grade and again at graduation.⁸²

3.2.3 What is the evidence?

At this stage of the renewal process at YBC, we can conclude that there has been a marked shift in academic performance for the better. No doubt this reflects the kinds of relational, pedagogical, structural and community related conditions that are being created at YBC (see section 3.1). Interpreting and comparing standardised test data in low SES school communities, however, should be treated with caution. The warnings posted on the My School online data site are especially relevant to YBC:

- Care must be taken when interpreting data for schools with small student numbers.
- Care must be taken when interpreting the percentage data if the school only has a small number of students tested. In these schools the percentages of students in each of the three groupings (Top 20%, Middle 60% and Bottom 20%) can vary quite markedly from one year to the next.
- Care should be taken with the use of the 2008 data as this was the first year of NAPLAN testing.

Furthermore, as one senior officer explained, "There is no like school". In the case of YBC the notion of 'like schools' is problematic because YBC is deliberately used as a school to enrol students who are causing problems, not fitting in at other schools or are transient. As well, a high percentage of students have significant learning difficulties, health problems, and social and emotional issues. In this context, YBC rightly spends a considerable amount of time and energy focusing on values and behaviours that promote the students' capacity to be good citizens and engaged learners. In the words of one year team leader, "we make it a very safe place for them, a happy place, we try to be calm and patient, everyone to get through. So that's the ultimate - it's centred on the child. I know they have this motto, 'one student at a time', well we really do practise it, and it is slow at times." Rather than 'seeing schooling small', that is a preoccupation with test scores, time spent on management, accountability measures and so on,⁸³ YBC focuses on helping students and their families to overcome 'the impediments to personal and social progress'.⁸⁴ Based on the evidence in sections 3.1 and 3.2, YBC has made significant gains in this area.

With these caveats in mind, there are some very encouraging trends at YBC in terms of 'hard data'. Taking a snapshot of YBC's performance, Figure 4 on the following page shows that student progress in reading and numeracy is very positive.

82 Big Picture Education (2010), *School research framework*. Big Picture Education: Melbourne, p.32.

83 Green, M. (1999). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-bass, p.11; see also Kozol, J. (2007). *Letters to a young teacher*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

84 Kincheloe, J. (2009). No short cuts in urban education. In S. Steinberg (Ed.), *Diversity and multiculturalism: A reader* (pp.379-409). New York: Peter Lang, p.387.

Figure 4: Reading and Numeracy Progress – All Students, 2008-2009 ⁸⁵

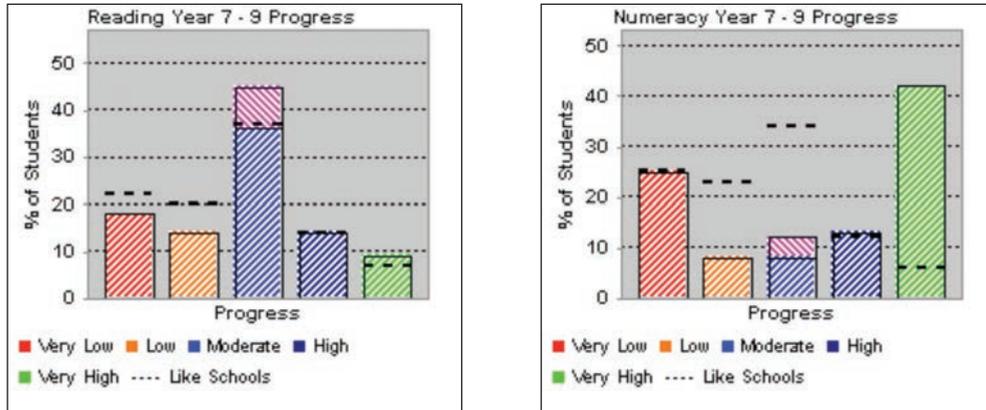
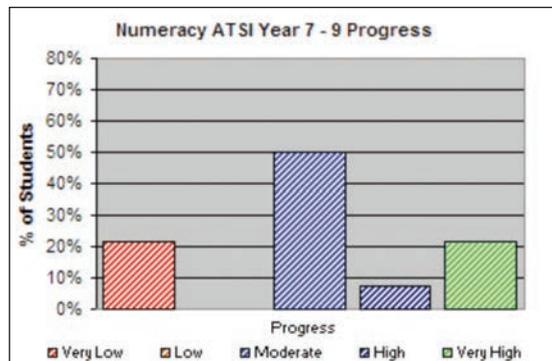


Figure 5 highlights the progress of Indigenous students in numeracy.

Figure 5: Numeracy Progress – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, 2006-2009 ⁸⁶



Overall, YBC has achieved a 5% increase in students in the top 20% for numeracy and 7% in the middle 60% while there has been a decrease of 12% in the bottom 20%. When compared to 'like schools' the performance is even more pronounced as shown in Figure 6 on the following page.

⁸⁵ Yule Brook College (2010). *Annual report, 2009* (Source: First Cut Data 2009), p.30.

⁸⁶ Yule Brook College (2010). *Annual report, 2009* (Source: First Cut Data 2007), p.28.

Figure 6: Numeracy Year 9, All Students, 2009 ⁸⁷

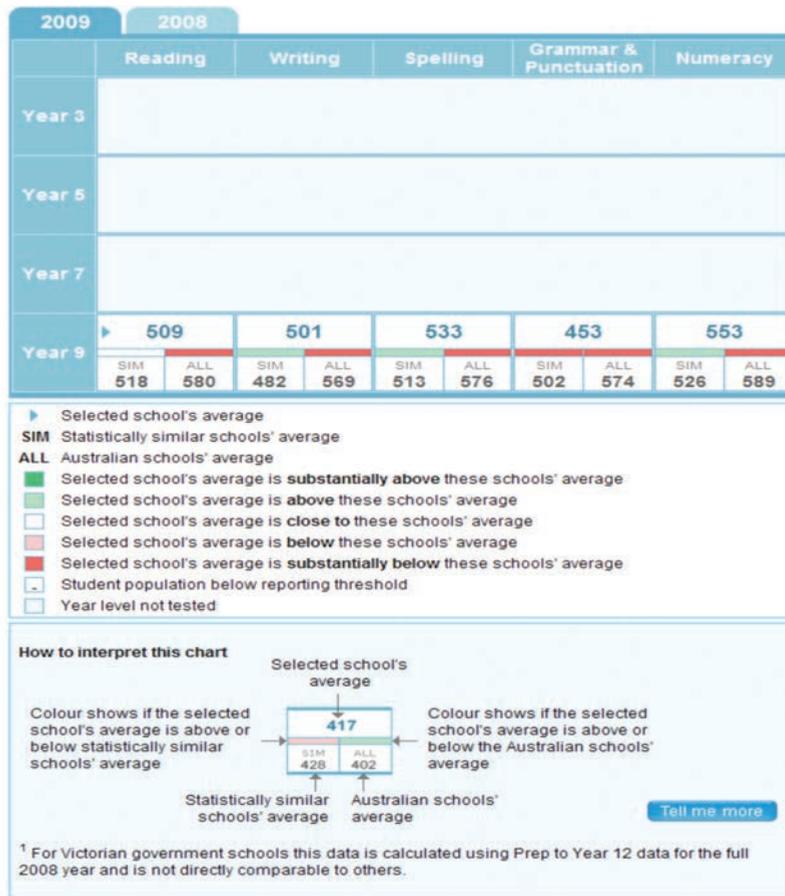
All Students

	School Year 9 Numeracy	
	2008	2009
Total Students	59	46

State	Year 9 Numeracy			
	School		Like Schools	
	2008	2009	2008	2009
Top 20%	8%	13%	7%	6%
Middle 60%	56%	63%	57%	55%
Bottom 20%	36%	24%	36%	38%

In terms of NAPLAN data for 2009 YBC has achieved significantly better results than 2008. With the exception of the Punctuation and Grammar section of NAPLAN testing, students performed as expected or better in writing, spelling and numeracy for 'like schools', as illustrated in Figure 7:

Figure 7: NAPLAN Data 2009 ⁸⁸

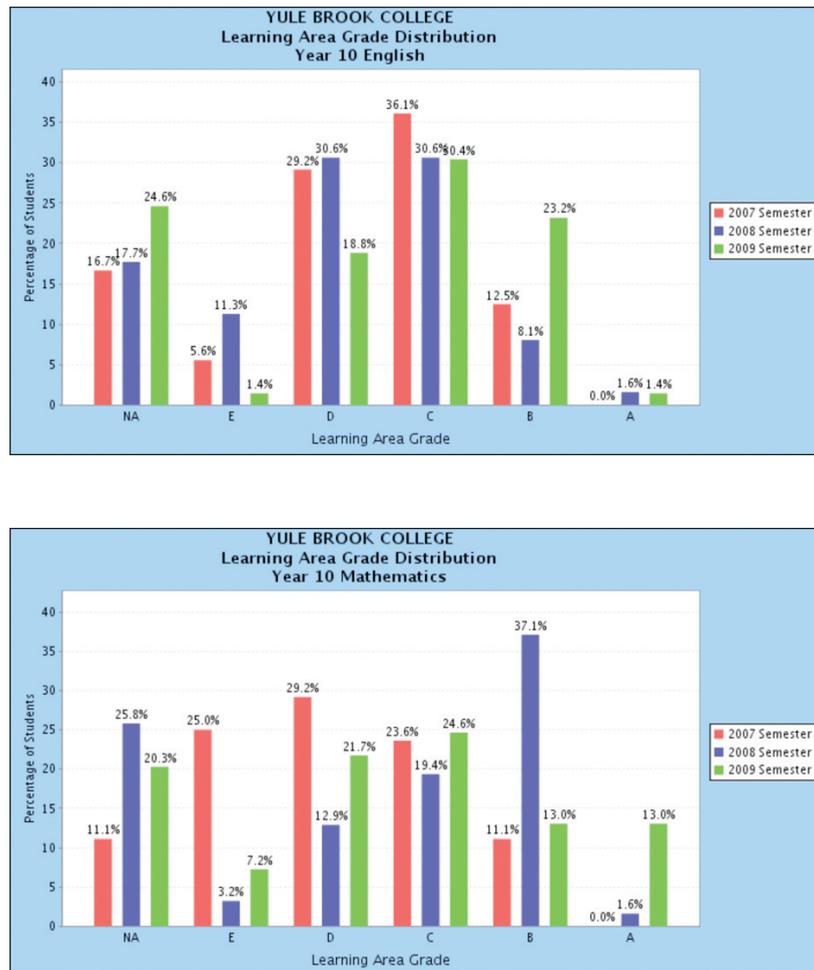


87 My schools website Online Data, 2009. Available at: <http://www.myschool.edu.au/>

88 Information from ACARA My Schools website for Yule Brook College, 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.myschool.edu.au/Main.aspx?PagelD=0&SDRSchoolId=WA%20G0000004127&DEEWRIId=17977&CalendarYear=2009>

There has also been a positive impact on student progress in reading and numeracy as measured by grade distribution based on teacher professional judgements as demonstrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Student Progress from Year 8 to 10 Based on Teacher Judgement ⁸⁹



YBC's Annual Report (2009) concludes that:

Teacher judgement data across all year groups shows a similar trend with students making good progress over time. A comparison with like schools shows Yule Brook College moves students through the higher grades in English and mathematics with more success than the comparison groups. By Year 10 there are around 5% more students awarded A, B or C in English and significantly more students working at an A level in mathematics than in like schools.⁹⁰

More recent NAPLAN data trends for 2010 shown in Figures 9 and 10 below highlight some positive trends in reading and spelling respectively in comparison to like schools and other public schools across Australia. Whilst this data should be treated with caution, it is clear that YBC is making sound progress and like all schools has things to work on. In spelling, punctuation and grammar the data indicates that further attention is required.

89 Yule Brook College (2010), *Annual Report, 2009*, p. 5.

90 Yule Brook College (2010), *Annual Report, 2009*, p. 5.

Figure 9: Progress from Year 7 2008 to Year 9 2010 – Numeracy ⁹¹

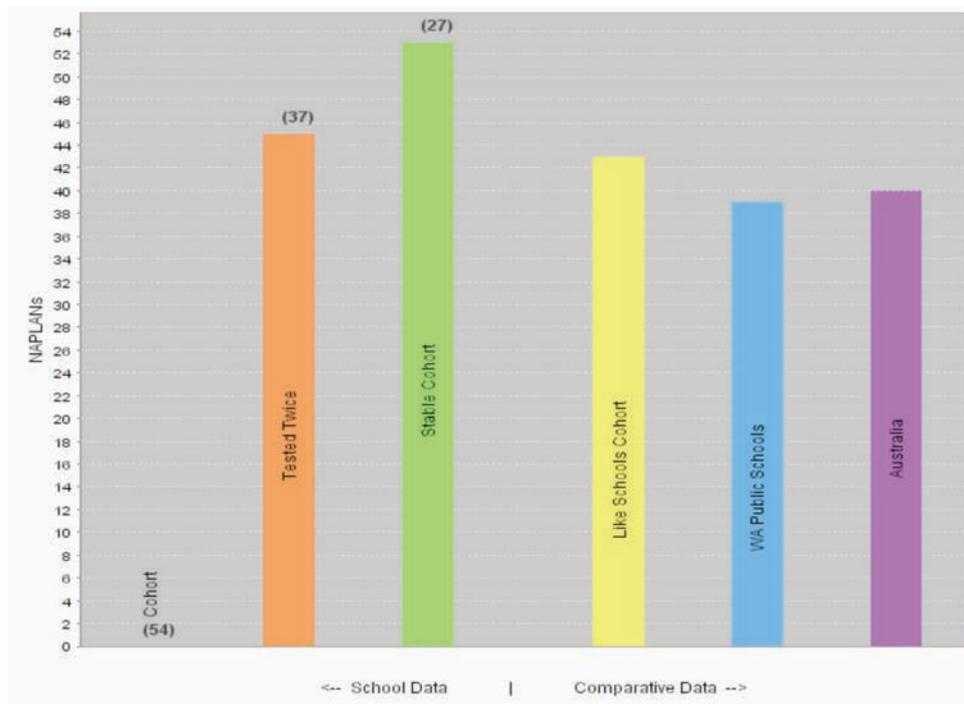
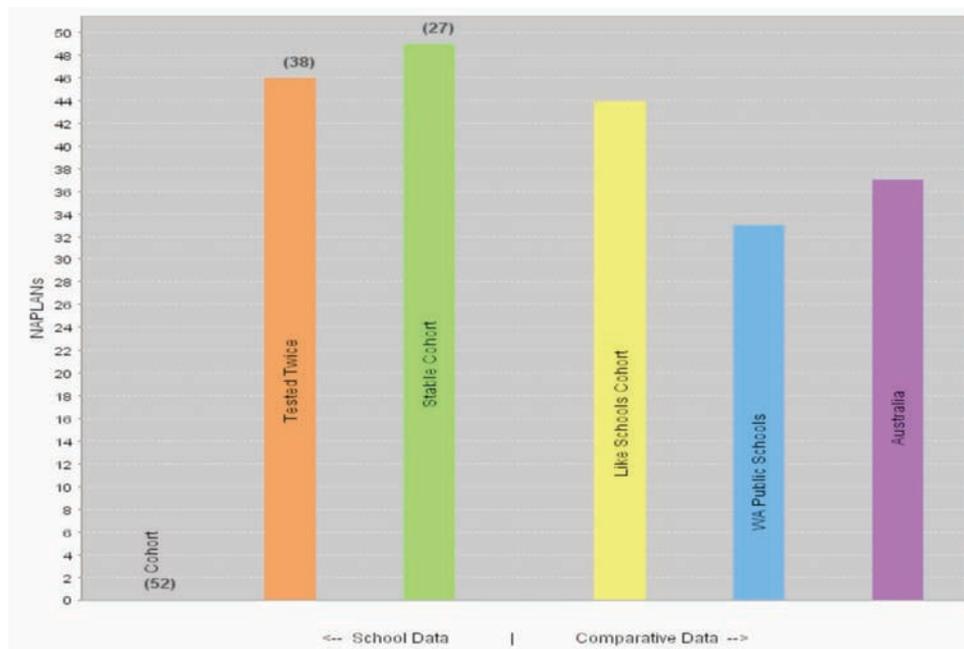


Figure 10: Progress from Year 7 2008 to Year 9 2010 – Reading ⁹²



91 2010 NAPLAN/MSE/FIRST CUT. Retrieved from Schools Online and SAIS. The **progress** between the two years of testing is measured by the difference between the two mean scores in NAPLANs; The **Cohort** measurement is the difference between the mean scores of all tested students in the 2008 and 2010 cohorts; The **Tested Twice** measurement is the difference between the mean scores of all students tested in public schools in 2008 and 2010; The **Stable Cohort** measurement is the difference between the mean scores of students tested in your school in 2008 and 2010; The **Like School Cohort** comparison is the difference between the mean scores of all tested students in your Like Schools in 2008 and 2010; The **WA Public Schools** comparison is the difference between the mean scores of all tested students in WA Public schools in 2008 and 2010; The **Australia** comparison is the difference between the mean scores of all tested students in Australia in 2008 and 2010.

92 2010 NAPLAN/MSE/FIRST CUT. Retrieved from Schools Online and SAIS.

Turning to some of the anecdotal evidence from school leaders, senior officers, teachers, and parents we also find evidence of these positive pedagogical shifts:

We saw massive gains in Getting it Right mathematics in conjunction with the relationship building that came with the Big Picture program, so our Getting it Right results in numeracy were far more significant than a lot of other schools. (school leader)

My child was encouraged to study his passion. It is the main reason he wanted to attend YBC. The teachers were always more than helpful. My child developed strong relationships with staff and mentors whilst on internship in the business community. He was allowed to access outside training institutions to gain relevant qualifications for his passion. Academically he thrived as his confidence grew. From a boy who lacked confidence to a boy who began to lead, we were extremely proud of him and the contribution that the group of teachers at YBC had on him. (parent)

And to think, when you talk to staff and they tell you that their biggest challenge is getting academic rigour, whereas their biggest challenge five years ago was that I'm spending every minute of my classroom time on behaviour management. That's a big shift, because they [students] are working, they're engaged, it's simply a matter now of how to get the depth into their work. (school leader)



They've [visiting primary school principals] just been absolutely blown away by the engagement of the kids, "How do you get that kid to work?", "Where are the kids that are sitting outside?", "Where are the ones that are in trouble?", "Why is there no graffiti around here?", "Why are all the classrooms so neat?", "Why is it quiet?" Even though there's no teaching going on, kids are sitting there, working, talking about their work, moving to the computer lab, coming back. (school leader)

Yeah, let the kids have a little bit of input about what they want, and you'll find they'll learn a heap more, rather than being told this is what you're going to do. And they're all individuals, so they shouldn't be all herded like sheep, and this is what the curriculum says, and that's what you're going to learn – let them have a little bit of a say. (parent)

What they [students] would talk about is their exhibitions, they would talk about internships, they would talk about the actual learning goals, you know, they would use the language of the learning goals. So they would talk about quantitative reasoning and things like that. (school leader)



3.3 Community

3.3.1 Why is this issue important?

Research indicates that when schools in low SES communities build deep school-community connections then student engagement in learning is more likely to happen.⁹³ We can summarise the importance of this issue as follows:

Young people's identities are shaped by social and cultural influences that lie outside the perimeters of the school. Yet, all too often an institutional barrier operates between schools and communities. Where schools see themselves as a part of the community, there is a greater likelihood of creating the right kind of cultural settings that will bring parents into the educational lives of their children. This is a twofold process. Schools are significant neighbourhood assets with the resources to promote civic engagement and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of local communities. Equally, communities have funds of knowledge that can enhance student engagement and school retention.⁹⁴

The challenge is to find the appropriate mechanisms and strategies to enable these kinds of deep connections to be forged in troubled times. In this task, YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS have provided some strong evidence about what works in particular communities.

3.3.2 What works?

When we look at the research evidence about school-community renewal and what works the following elements typically appear. By way of summary⁹⁵:

- **Trust and goodwill:** The school recognises the importance of building social capital, promoting community dialogue and encouraging local ownership.
- **Active citizenship:** The school builds local skills and knowledge to increase community participation and collective action, so that the

school 'belongs to' rather than relates to the community.

- **Community as asset:** The school views its community as an asset with a reserve of skills, talents and gifts to enrich learning for students. Curriculum projects draw on local personnel and resources to connect students to their community.
- **Valuing teachers:** Teachers are seen as allies and advocates for students and communities in processes of community renewal and reinvention.
- **Celebrating community:** The school ensures that students' learning is publicly celebrated and recognised in socially worthwhile ways.
- **Global perspectives:** Students are encouraged to see themselves as members of a global community through a curriculum that promotes an understanding of the interconnectedness of local, regional and global issues.

At all three research sites these elements are specifically embedded in Big Picture Education distinguisher No. 7, 'Learning in the community':

The main component of every student's education, from Year 10 onwards, is the LTI (Learning through Internship). In this minimum 10-12 hour, two-day-a-week internship with a mentor, an expert in the field of the student's interest, the students complete authentic projects (projects at internship sites that benefit the student and the mentor) with deep investigations. These projects are the main route to academic growth and investigation in the curriculum. These authentic projects are connected to the student's interests and needs and are 'real to' or meet the needs of the mentors. Importantly, they are also evaluated against professional standards of the workplace. From Year 10 students have an LTI each year they are in school. In Year 12 students undertake a senior thesis project (a large culminating independent real world project) that may encompass the LTI. In Year 9 students will complete a number of workplace interviews, shadow days and some students

93 Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Skokie, IL: ACTA Publications; Nixon, J., Allan, J., & Mannion, G. (2001). Educational renewal as democratic practice: 'New' community schooling in Scotland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 5(4), pp.329-352; Goodman, J. & Kuzmick, J. (1997). Bringing a progressive pedagogy to conventional schools: Theoretical and practical implications from Harmony. *Theory and Practice*, 36(2), pp.79-86; and Fine, M. (1993). [A]pparent involvement: Reflections on parents, power and urban public schools. *Teachers College Record*, 94(4), pp.682-710.

94 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2010). *'Hanging in with kids' in touch times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage in the relational school*. New York: Peter Lang, p.204.

95 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008). *'Hanging in with kids' in touch times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage*. School of Education: University of Ballarat, pp.136-38.

may even start an LTI. Prior to Year 10 students participate in LTEs (Learning through Experiences) – excursions into the community and visits to workplaces. All students participate in service learning activities and projects when possible.⁹⁶

Furthermore, Big Picture Education distinguisher No. 9 ensures that ‘Families are enrolled too’, thus providing a mechanism to enrol families into the educational lives of their children as well as the school. Big Picture programs at YBC, Thornlie and Manjimup articulate this important message as follows:

Parents and families are an essential element of a Big Picture school from start up through to everyday operation. They feel welcomed and valued at a Big Picture school.

Families are engaged around each one of their children by participating in Learning Plan meetings and exhibitions every school term. Families are resources at these meetings because they know their children well. They can suggest mentoring possibilities and use their local knowledge, assets and networks in ways that support the school.



They play an active role in the school community that includes political issues, social gatherings and supporting new parents and students.

They serve on committees and/or the governing board.

A conscious effort is made to educate parents to play a proactive role in the school life of their children through high school and on to further learning.

At a practical level YBC commits significant resources to developing positive relationships with parents through a wide range of activities including family dinners where teachers and students cook and serve their families. Teachers telephone parents before the school year starts and reintroduce themselves to start the relationship on a positive note. When a student has an ‘exhibition’ it is mandatory that a family member be present to be part of the assessment process. On occasions when no family member has attended a staff member has driven to grandma’s house to collect her and ensure that the student has a family

member present. Many small and large strategies are implemented by year teams to ensure families are coming onto the school regularly.

3.3.3 What is the evidence?

YBC has undertaken a significant amount of community capacity building over the years. This involves not only practical partnerships with various stakeholders, something most schools do as a matter of course, but a major rethink of school-community renewal processes. Moving beyond the top-down, carrot-and-stick approach of accountability and testing regimes developed by outside ‘experts’, the focus is on ‘rich and dialogic interactions’ between teachers, students and community.⁹⁶ There are three different kinds of community relationships that have been brought into existence:

1. Partnerships: a formalised relationship where there exist formal structures such as a memorandum of understanding, or where the organisation is actually a part of Yule Brook College. Organisations coming into this category are: Big Picture Education Australia, Clontarf Foundation, the local Aboriginal community through the Aboriginal Community Agreement and YouthCare (referred to as Category 1).

2. Providers of Training/Counselling/Mentoring: accessible to all schools.

In this category we can place: SMYL (South Metropolitan Youth Link), Emergency Services Cadets, Duke of Edinburgh Award, Smith Family, Beacon Foundation, Communicare, Transport Authority, PCYC, Silver Trowel, Hillside Farm, Australian Technical Colleges, EdVentures WA (referred to as Category 2).

3. Networks: again, accessible to all and exist between business/government/community.

Organisations in this group include: Maddington Kenwick CLN (Community Leadership Network), the City of Gosnells, Strong Families, Langford Aboriginal Association and other community groups, Canning Coalition, Dare to Lead, and the Community Development Corporation (Barry Cable) (referred to as Category 3).

Besides the survey responses which indicate significant levels of parent satisfaction (see section 3.1.3) and improved academic performance (see

⁹⁶ Gallagher, C. (2007). *Reclaiming assessment: A better alternative to the accountability agenda*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, p.8.

section 3.2.3), the most salient evidence of success around school-community capacity building comes from the participants themselves:

I think it's [exhibitions] made such a difference in that you know that you're going to get that connection with the family and you're going to get that opportunity for the students who would never think of standing up and celebrating their work or showing their work to actually get their parents to come onboard and recognise just how much work they are doing. And the parents really seem to enjoy the occasion and they enjoy coming through and filling out the assessment sheets, the reflection sheets during that process. And obviously, it's a huge learning curve... but, you know, the very first comment coming in is, I can't believe my son actually stood up there and delivered what he did. (year team leader)

I love it, when an exhibition is coming up, I'm really quite excited. ... We discuss with her the things that I was surprised by, the things that I enjoyed and yes, so I think they like the discussion afterwards because they know we've heard what they'd shown me there. ... So yes, it feels like you're more involved and that leaves the child feeling like you're part of it. (parent)

And then Big Picture sort of flowed naturally, from where the kids were immune [from school], it was a community before we knew it, where the community didn't used to go [to the school]. (senior officer)

We made a point, from day one, that when we enrol your kid in the school, we enrol you as a family in the school. (Year team leader)

We would have a parent night in the past, maybe 3 parents turn up to see their kids' reports and to see the work being done. We have a parent night now, there's 99.9% attendance. So it's amazing, and the thing is we celebrate a lot, so everything is about celebration. (year team leader)

We had invited a lot of the Aboriginal elders into the school. We formed a Charter of Operations ... we signed a Charter of Commitment from the school, the teachers and community and that ended up being extremely successful in getting people into the school and they ended up developing a DVD around that as best practice for all schools in Australia. (school leader)

3.4 School structure

3.4.1 Why is this issue important?

The structural features of schools, such as layout of classrooms, timetabling arrangements, curriculum organisation, staff roles and the use of technology, can help to build relationships, rigour and relevance in students' engagement for learning. Rather than allowing structures to drive curriculum, there is an intentional effort to create a school culture where 'students come first'. From this starting point, there is a stronger sense of belongingness, ownership and engagement from students and teachers.⁹⁷ As noted earlier, when these relational elements are missing, for whatever reason, then there are increased levels of student disengagement, alienation and low level learning (see section 1.3).

3.4.2 What works?

The research literature highlights a number of elements of school structure (culture) that are likely to help students engage in deep learning, among them⁹⁸:

Students come first: The school knows each student well and is willing to place their needs and interests above all else. There is sufficient flexibility in school structures and programs to accommodate students with part-time jobs and family responsibilities.

A sense of place and belongingness: The school is seen as a learning community where all students are valued and made to feel welcome and safe.

Pathways and choices: The school acknowledges that every student has different talents, needs and interests and therefore requires different learning experiences and opportunities. Personalised learning plans and well coordinated counselling processes assist students to make informed decisions about vocational and educational pathways without closing down future study options too early in the secondary years.

97 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008), p.132; see also Riordan, R., Roche, B., Goldhammer, H., & Stephen, D. (1999). *Seeing the future: A planning guide for high schools*. Providence, RI: Big Picture. This report draws on the New Urban High School project which examines exemplary schools that have set high standards for all students by linking work and learning. It provides a comprehensive overview of school structure, design, culture and pedagogy that works.

98 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2008), pp.132-34.

Small learning teams: The school is structured in ways that allow those closest to students to have control over decisions about what is learned, by whom, when and how.

Interagency connections: There is a need to 'rally the whole village' around student welfare and support with a strong ethic of care.

A pleasant built environment: Students and teachers require appropriate resources and facilities to support their teaching and learning. When students from contexts of disadvantage are provided with equitable resources in regard to school buildings, facilities, and maintenance, there is likely to be a stronger sense of ownership, self-worth and achievement in comparison to their wealthier counterparts.

Educative leadership: The school leadership is willing to create a more flexible, innovative and responsive learning environment. School leaders see themselves first and foremost as curriculum leaders with the vision and capacity to articulate and promote educational ideals in the school and wider community.

Culture of innovation: In circumstances where traditional approaches to schooling do not work, school leaders are prepared to encourage innovation and risk taking in order to find productive ways of engaging students.

Reinventing policy locally: School leaders ensure that the interests and needs of teachers and students are protected against the worst excesses of centrally mandated policies and practices.



Linda Darling-Hammond summarises the research evidence as follows:

Research suggests that successful new models of schooling require strong teaching faculties who work in organizational structures that create more coherence and a 'communal' orientation, in which staff see themselves as part of a family and work together to create a caring environment. These schools reduce curriculum differentiation and tracking, increase instructional authenticity and rigor, and enhance the extent to which students are well known by adults through systems such as advisories and team teaching.⁹⁹



At YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS there is a deliberate strategy to incorporate these elements through the creation of the Advisory. Big Picture Education distinguisher No. 6, 'Learning in advisory' explains how it works:

The advisory structure is the core organisational and relational structure of a Big Picture school. It is the heart and soul of the school and is often described as the 'home' and 'second family' by students. All BPE schools have a small number of students (goal of 15) with one advisory teacher for a minimum of two years (preferably for all years of high school).

The advisory teacher's role is to manage the student's individual, personalised Learning Plans. To do this, the advisor must get to know each student and his or her family well (this includes weekly one-on-one meetings with each student). The advisory teacher maintains close connection to family including ILP meetings each term along with family involvement in exhibitions.

The advisory teacher does not just teach his or her subject area; rather he or she draws on many disciplines to meet the needs of each student, their projects, and the advisory activities. It is the advisory teacher's job to help students explore and pursue the student's identified interest(s) and develop deep projects within these interest areas.

99 Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press, p. 65.

The advisory teacher also organises the 'advisory time'. It is recommended that each school day begins and finishes with advisory time with a minimum of 8 periods of advisory over the three school days. If no LTI on the other two days advisory time is recommended. He or she facilitates the group activities that are designed to expose students to new ideas and concepts, provide academic learning opportunities, create a group identity and group process, and build a sense of belonging and trust in school and the educational process. The advisory teacher also notices gaps in student learning (eg literacy) and provides activities to meet the student needs.¹⁰⁰

It will be clear from the above that the timetabling approach used in traditional high schools is inconsistent with what is needed for these students. Moving students around the school from one content area to another has proven ineffective for disengaged students. Keeping small groups of students together for significant learning time with the one teacher has been an important factor in re-engaging students. This was evident at all three school sites.

YBC is unique in so far as it is a relatively small high school in the metropolitan area. Being small by itself, however, does not guarantee success, but it helps a lot. As the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other school reformers (Boyer, Sizer and Goodlad)¹⁰¹ discovered in America, high schools are more likely to be successful when they are small and personalised because the focus is on individual attention, care and support for every student. This is especially important in low SES school communities where one size fits few.¹⁰² In the words of Toch, "smaller schools encourage stronger bonds between students and teachers and generate a level of genuine caring and mutual obligation between them that's found far less frequently in comprehensive high schools".¹⁰³ Therefore, it should be hardly surprising that:

Students and teachers, as a result, tend to work harder on each others' behalf. Student and teacher attendance and student involvement in extracurricular activities are higher in smaller high schools. Teacher turnover and disciplinary

problems are lower. So are dropout rates. There's less tracking in smaller schools. And a wide range of studies reveal that average student achievement is as high as and often higher than that in large high schools, particularly among students from impoverished backgrounds.¹⁰⁴

For one school leader, the small size of YBC was not a problem, but rather an opportunity to innovate and 'do' high school differently:

And it was only really when a few of us decided let's just embrace its smallness, take advantage of what we've got. Like we've got kids that are difficult to work with, let's accept that because if we made this place any bigger it would be really, almost impossible to work in. (school leader)

In a school system that is deeply wedded both historically and economically to the large comprehensive high school, this was always going to pose problems. Small high schools are typically seen as a liability or a problem for the system rather than an asset or opportunity. Such schools are often threatened with closure or forced amalgamation to make them bigger or more 'viable'. As one senior officer observed, "I think the small size has been the most telling thing about why the system hasn't engaged more, they don't want to be seen to be supporting small schools, small high schools". The evidence from YBC and overseas¹⁰⁵ suggests, however, that there are strong grounds for seriously rethinking the role and place of small high schools within low SES school communities, and more broadly, the whole system. In other words, a serious cost benefit analysis would be a necessary first step to making informed policy decisions (see recommendation 7).

Without delving into this issue too far, when the combined hidden costs of large high schools (eg retention issues, suspension rates, absenteeism, crime rates, welfare costs, behaviour management, vandalism, unemployment, teacher attrition, and so on) are included, the issue of costs rapidly disappears. By way of illustration it is worth quoting at length from Chief Justice Martin's report on the real cost of juvenile justice to the Western Australian community:

100 Big Picture Education Australia (2010). *School research framework*. Big Picture Education: Melbourne, p.32

101 Boyer, E. (1983). *High school: A report on secondary education in America*. New York: Harper & Row; Goodlad, J. (1984). *A place called school: promise for the future*. New York: McGraw-Hill; and Sizer, T. (1996). *Horace's hope: What works for the American high school*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

102 Ohanian, S. (1999). *One size fits few: The folly of educational standards*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

103 Toch, T. (2003). *High schools on a human scale: How small schools can transform American education*. Boston: Beacon Press, p.12.

104 Toch, T. (2003), p.13.

105 Wasley, A. & Fine, M. (2000). *Small schools and the issue of scale*. New York: Bank Street College of Education; Fine, M. & Somerville, J. (1998) (Eds.). *Small schools, big imaginations*. Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.

The juvenile justice system of WA is extremely expensive. It costs between \$600 and \$700 per day to keep a juvenile in custody. Community-based supervision is a fraction of this cost, but if done properly, is still expensive. Some juveniles subjected to intensive, around the clock, community-based supervision cost the state many hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Auditor-General estimated that the 250 children who had the most intersection with the criminal justice system would, between the ages of 10 and 17 years, cost the state of Western Australia, \$100 million. That is an average of \$400 000 per child. And as I have mentioned, a disproportionate number of those children will be Aboriginal, and a significant proportion of those located in regional Western Australia.

Expenditure on corrective services in Western Australia is increasing at a significant rate. For example, between 2007/08 and 2010/11, the budget allocated to the Department of Corrective Services increased from \$473 million to \$771 million (an increase of 63%). Inevitably this will have reduced the resources available to other agencies of government. I have suggested on other occasions that government expenditure aimed at alleviating conditions which contribute to the causes of crime may provide more effective protection to the community than spending directed at the consequences of crime.¹⁰⁶

Picking up on the Chief Justice's point, one school leader captures the possibilities nicely when he says, "So within this large organisation we could be many different schools, really". In other words, a whole of government approach to finding solutions that work in low SES school communities and funding them may be a wise investment for society and the individual. We find similar arguments in places such as New York, often held up as the shining light around school reform. Here, the notion of a portfolio of schools allows school districts to provide a variety of educational options including clusters of small high schools to meet the needs of students and

communities. Darling-Hammond explains why this is a useful strategy in terms of student engagement in low SES school communities:

This notion of a portfolio of schools – also advocated by the Gates Foundation – has many potential virtues to recommend it. Certainly, choice is better than coercion in the management of education. Students and families could find better fits with their interests and philosophies, and make a greater commitment to schools they have chosen. Choice could make schools more accountable and attentive to student needs. Schools that create successful designs should benefit from more autonomy to refine and maintain their good work. If a portfolio strategy works well it should 'ensure' a supply of quality school options that reflects a community's needs, interest, and assets ... and [ensure] that every student has access to high quality schools that prepare them for further learning, work and citizenship."¹⁰⁷

Richard Teese, an Australian expert on educational inequality, explains why this more expansive and flexible view of school options is in everyone's interests:

The question we need to ask is not whether the schools serving the poorest 10-15% of the population have succeeded, but whether the systems of which they form a part have been successful. For, like it or not, the poorest schools serve the whole system. They look after all the children who are not wanted elsewhere, who cannot move elsewhere, whose parents cannot educate them well, whose parents either don't care or don't understand or have too little time or resources to help. The health of the whole system is reflected in the performance of the poorest schools.¹⁰⁸

The second structural element at YBC that appears to be making a difference is the focus on teacher development and learning. This idea is encapsulated comprehensively in BigPictureEducation distinguisher No. 11, 'Teachers are leaders and learners too'.

106 Martin, W. (2010). *Misspent youth: Opportunities for juvenile justice*. Paper presented at the John Curtin Institute of Public Policy, Public Policy Forum August 2010, retrieved 20 October 2010 from http://www.supremecourt.wa.gov.au/publications/pdf/CURTIN_PUBLIC_POLICY_FORUM_26082010.pdf

107 Darling-Hammond (2010), *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press, p.267.

108 Teese, R. (2006). Condemned to innovate. *Griffith Review*, 11, p. 3. Retrieved on 27 March 2006 from: www.griffith.edu.au/O1/griffithreview/past_editions.php?id=301

There is much to learn for those working in a BPE school. The design takes time and practice to learn and implement. The unique nature of every student means that nothing is ever known 'all the way through'. Everything needs review. New ideas are constantly required. Teachers need to keep learning too. Teachers and leaders need to do the things that we ask of the students: deal with new ideas, develop new ideas, learn new ways of working, develop a reflective practice, and exhibit this learning to others.

Professional development for advisory teachers is done at each and every school by principals, other staff at the school and by BPE staff and coaches at staff meetings and retreats. It is recognised as necessary support for teachers who take seriously their roles of 'designer, inquirer, and clinician'.

Leaders and advisory teachers also get support through one on one coaching and small group learning. Materials developed within BPE are provided to all staff. Developing a robust reflective practice is essential to the effective BPE school.

Professional development is ongoing both at the school and within the Big Picture network.

Advisory teachers are encouraged to participate in all BPE professional development activities including our annual national conference, and other Big Picture events at their locale.

In addition to formal professional development, advisors learn from each other on a daily basis; they serve as mentors and leaders to one another. Each year they talk about what they taught, passing down information from year to year. Much of the learning about how to be an advisor is done by interactions and the collegial relationship with other advisors which results in collaboration and a passing on of knowledge.

All BPE principals are supported by Big Picture staff. They get support from a BPE school coach onsite. The principals participate in ongoing year-round professional development by BPE and are supported in the start-up years of operation by Big Picture. They are part of and actively participate in the Big Picture network of schools internationally, nationally and in their locale.¹⁰⁹

3.4.3 What is the evidence?

Based on the interview evidence, there is no doubt that the Big Picture Education design structures (distinguishers) adopted at YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS have played a pivotal role in achieving enhanced levels of student engagement for learning as well as teacher development and learning. In terms of the need for school flexibility and commitment to creating an appropriate curriculum and process for each student the following comments are illustrative:

It [Big Picture Education] helps integrate troubled/ low achieving students into a framework that is both rewarding for them, as well as helps them to set achievable goals in their lives. It offers a structure for people who might otherwise have been left behind, whilst being flexible enough to assist high achieving students. (student teacher)



If you are the most capable student, you have the easiest pathway through [high school]. If you are the least capable and the most vulnerable, you have the most diverse way through. And, I mean the easiest thing is to be a smart kid who wants TEE because it's all laid on and you just

cha cha cha. (senior officer)

I do not want you to start with the external curriculum and then work out a program for the kids. I want you to go the other way [start where the kids are at] and then go in a backwards manner. (school leader)

Give kids, each kid the opportunity to shine, and I know that sounds a bit simple but it's so critical and even I think of one kid who is an ESL kid who really the only thing he has going for him, was he had an absolutely wicked sense of humour, but I'm sure it was getting knocked on the head in every other class because it wasn't the time and place. You've just got to give them ... a chance to shine and connect. (Advisory teacher)

And again because I work with them all the time [in Advisory], I know I've got a good relationship with them so I know if they're just having a bad day and they need a bit of a break or if they actually are just trying to pull the wool over my eyes. (Advisory teacher)

109 Big Picture Education Australia (2010), *School research framework*. Big Picture Education: Melbourne, p.43.

I think once they're here and they realise that they are actually treated as individuals and as adults, where the rules that we have here are clear, concise and very few, they don't want to go back into that environment where they become part of what they perceive a machine, which is often very confusing for them. They don't really seem to know where they fit in that hierarchy. (teacher)

For each of the schools in the study, it was the school that drove the change, with the support of all involved. At YBC it was the teachers who, in despair, knew that they had to start doing things differently and set about learning what this might be.

If they [teachers] actually have authorship within the process of change, then those people will be involved and they will grow with it and they will learn with it and they will adapt it and they will modify it and make it something far stronger. (school leader)

I think you need some kind of structure to work in [eg Big Picture Education] and then within that, like, I know I can get help from YBC, and seeing their programs and then adapting how we want to use them. Like the Learning Goals and the Principles of Design, like Individual Learning Plans and everything like that. (Advisory teacher)



3.5 Public policy

3.5.1 Why is this issue important?

Teachers and principals do not operate in a policy vacuum. In fact, a case can be made to suggest that teachers are subjected to more policy regimes and controls than any other profession. If we take policy to include the broad range of policy statements, guidelines and directives emanating from commonwealth and state governments and their departments, as well as those produced in district offices and schools, teachers face an increasing array of policy texts and directives around curriculum, reporting, accountability, testing, governance, social inclusion, performance management, school evaluation and transparency to name a few. All of this occurs within a broader set of neo-liberal discourses dominated by the language of markets, choice and managerialism.¹¹⁰

3.5.2 What works?

Internationally recognised educator Professor Linda Darling-Hammond explains how "...policies often create a hostile environment for school models that deviate from traditional structures that mountains of regulations have held in place".¹¹¹ Like Darling-Hammond, we want to acknowledge that mandated policy frameworks, directives and regulations make a difference because they can serve to either constrain or enable school change for student engagement (see section 1.8). For the purposes of this report, suffice it to say that policies work best in low SES school communities when some of the following elements exist¹¹²:

- **Agency and commitment:** When teachers are committed to the ideals of public schooling and show a willingness to act as advocates for marginalised students then there is a greater chance of engaging students. These teachers are flexible, willing to support innovation and commit to ensuring that all students succeed.

110 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McNerney, P. (2008). Chapter 7 provides a comprehensive discussion of the broader policy context. See also Bonner, C. & Caro, J. (2007). *The stupid country: How Australia is dismantling public education*. Sydney: New South.

111 Darling-Hammond, L. (2010), *The flat world and education: how America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press, p.64.

112 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McNerney, P. (2008). 'Hanging in with kids' in *tough times: Engagement in contexts of educational disadvantage*. School of Education, University of Ballarat, pp.118-122.

- **Pedagogically focused policy:** Rules and regulations are not seen as an end in themselves but a vehicle for student engagement in learning. Student behaviour policies incorporating practices of suspension and exclusion often mean that the most disadvantaged students become disconnected from schools. Whether students stay on at school depends on a school's capacity to provide relevant, inclusive and engaging programs.
- **Taking ownership and responsibility:** Schools attempting to revitalise curriculum and improve educational pathways had a strong sense of what was needed at the local and regional level. They were prepared to develop their own reading of what was needed to transform schooling arrangements to better serve the needs and aspirations of their students and communities.
- **A culture of innovation:** Although schools may be able to access system resources to support their efforts to improve student engagement, there is a general consensus that the provision of pathways and hope is largely contingent on developing innovative school-based responses to student concerns.
- **An ethos of cooperation and mutual support:** Solutions to such problems as maintaining senior school options (Year 11 and 12) and special programs involves a high degree of cooperation amongst schools in the region.
- **Finding the progressive edge of policies:** Schools have a capacity to take from policy what they see as useful for their own ends whilst sidelining what does not fit their idea of good teaching and learning.
- **Complementing school and system-derived data:** Schools are able to supplement test driven data with in-house evaluations of student learning. They have far more sophisticated ways of assessing and reporting on student learning involving student surveys, teacher judgements, exhibitions, student work, and community feedback.
- **Taking advantage of policy resources:** Schools see opportunities to advance their own agenda by accessing centrally-based funds and programs. In short, schools and teachers engage in creative and productive ways with public policies as they seek to re-align mandated guidelines with local priorities and their knowledge of what actually works for students.

Based on previous studies and what teachers are saying at YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS, 'It is abundantly clear that issues of student engagement and school retention can only be addressed in a meaningful way by reclaiming and reasserting the primacy of teaching and learning in schools'.¹¹³ There is a view that externally imposed policies and bureaucratic responses to disengagement will not work.¹¹⁴ There are much better ways to create positive learning environments at the school level¹¹⁵, and these are the important lessons from YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS (see section 4.1).

3.5.3 What is the evidence?

George Wood, the highly regarded principal of Federal Hocking High School in Ohio, captures the essence of good public policy in the following way:

*So what would a sane person, perchance a sane Congress [Government], do to help and support our kids and schools? Hate to be simplistic, but here you go – We have to shore up our safety net for all kids to have access to health care, food, and shelter; use federal resources to get dollars to kids in the most need; and focus on all schools using the lessons learned from our most innovative and successful schools and getting the regulations and rules that prevent this change out of the way.*¹¹⁶

Pursuing Wood's comments for a moment, we begin to appreciate how policies must address not only the cultural, pedagogical and organisational features of schools, but the structural inequalities that exist in low SES school communities. This involves a stronger commitment to social justice as a way of organising school level change to address the impact of poverty, racism and social class.¹¹⁷ In short, schools cannot do it all by themselves.

113 Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2010). *'Hanging in with kids' in tough times: Engagement in context of educational disadvantage in the relational school*. New York: Peter Lang, p.193.

114 Roselli, A. (2005). *Dos & Don'ts of education reform: Toward a radical remedy for educational failure*. New York: Peter Lang; Sarasin, S. (1990). *The predictable failure of educational reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

115 Senge, P. (1994). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.

116 Wood, G. (2010). *Waiting for sanity in education reform*. Retrieved 4th November 2010 from: <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/guest-bloggers/waiting-for-sanity.html>

117 Connell, R. (1993). *Schools and social justice*. Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Education Foundation; Reid, A. (Ed.). *Going public: Education policy and public education in Australia*. West Deakin: Australian Curriculum Studies Association; Smyth, J., Hattam, R., & Lawson, P. (1998). *Schooling for a fair go*. Sydney: Federation Press; Thompson, P. (2002). *Schooling the rust belt kids: Making the difference in changing times*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Based on the interview data collated during this project, we see evidence of the ways in which ‘the system’ (refers to DoE central office and/or district office as well as federal and state government policies) operates to either support or constrain school change for student engagement in low SES school communities. The following comments draw attention to some of the inherent structural and cultural ‘road blocks’ (eg lack of leadership and risk taking; overly bureaucratic and inefficient decision-making; poor resourcing and support for innovation; lack of communication and failure to connect research, policy and practice in a coherent manner) characteristic of large organisations:

And that’s the problem with the system, the reason no one stands up and takes a real leadership stance is because leadership is quashed ... system doesn’t encourage leadership, it doesn’t encourage innovation ... protecting the system. (teacher)

They [principals] get stomped on basically, they get pulled back to the fold because the system relentlessly holds principals in a formation that it wants to hold them in and it doesn’t like breaking out of the pack. It certainly doesn’t like people doing it in a kind of way that’s snubbing their nose a bit at the system and the rules and the rule makers so if you don’t play the game and you’re really just trying to do the best thing for the kids and that school but you don’t play the game, the system gets you and it happens time and time again and sometimes it’s not a major thing ... mostly it’s just the principal gets the message, this is too hard, I’m not supported, I can’t go much further, I’ll quietly find another spot or I’ll pull back and just do the little things that I can. But my experience is it’s very hard for a principal to embark on ambitious reform, meaningful reform, that’s in some way or another showing the system what’s possible. (senior officer)

There’s a fear it’ll get into the media, that a school tried something different. (teacher)



When it came to doing something actively to support it [YBC], encouraging the principal to stay ... giving some undertakings that would allow the principal to think this is worth ... nah and by doing nothing, the principal leaves. (senior officer)

Essentially I couldn’t get any traction with the Education Department [DoE]. (school leader)

You don’t know what the bosses are thinking ... the whole conversation started to become ... I wonder what they’re planning, we hear this, we hear that. And they start to hear things from deputies at other schools or principals from other schools that they’d been told ... there was a whole pile of games being played [and] the school’s a bit of a pawn. (school coach)

Something has to be actively sponsored by everyone in that line [DoE hierarchy] and they then have to have the time and energy to prosecute a case for Yule Brook College, now that wasn’t happening and I don’t think people were trying to by default sink it, I don’t believe people were negatively disposed to it but no one put in the amount of effort and time to turn that into active support and commitment to get Yule Brook to go and get other schools to pick up on that, to go and learn from Yule Brook, that didn’t happen.... If you don’t stay relentlessly involved and most bureaucracies are, you know, running from here to there, it doesn’t happen so it’s almost neglect rather than a failure to really see that this is a good thing. (senior officer)

We spend an inordinate amount of time trying to find individual solutions for some kids because we cannot place them in a school. Now that just happens in an ad hoc way. I think we need a systemic commitment and response to those [disengaged] kids, and it should be a joined up government [response]. (senior officer)

We always felt we were a bit out on a limb and we had sought extra funding and there was funding that was promised but never delivered and those are frustrating issues that can actually slow you up. (school leader)

The system is very adept at putting funding towards disparate short term programs and expecting a long term result. They want an immediate education as a total structure, it's a total system. (school leader)

The system likes to have something that's the big packaged program that it can ... 10 schools this year, 40 schools next year, you know, that kind of thing, that thinking is still there so this idea that a school finds its [own] way ... its uniqueness, its principal running it this way, it's not really our system. (senior officer)

Listen to the students ... and if I had any advice for the system it would be, let us get on with the job properly ... don't put shackles on us. (school leader)

Whilst these comments may appear overly bleak, the reality is that innovative schools, principals and teachers often find productive and creative ways to do what is in the best interests of their students and communities as demonstrated at YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS (see 3.5.2) (eg creating a vision; developing a coherent philosophy; focusing on teaching and learning; perseverance and team work; negotiation with students, parents and community; personalisation of learning; a culture of risk taking, innovation and reflection; mentoring and networks and so on). Some of the following comments reflect on these things:

It's that stuff to do with getting a school to cohere around something and then to have ... the perseverance to learn things to help each other out and just to keep on track until they really get somewhere. (senior officer)

It was the negotiation of the parent and the student in the individual program based around their passion that really, really made a difference that our teachers could see it was going to have a huge impact. (school leader)

Given what Yule Brook has achieved and where it is right now I think [mentoring] is a role that Yule Brook can play for other schools. Other schools have looked very seriously at what we are doing ... and what astounded them was that we were just willing to open our doors and say, "Just live in our classrooms for a week, we have nothing to hide," and nothing was pretentious. (school leader)

This work is not fast, they've been working together for years. (Big Picture school coach)

We've not had a single repeat offender since they started coming to school. And if that hasn't paid for us here, I'll go jump. (teacher)

It's something that you really need to have a belief about, that it's a system or way of teaching and learning that's going to engage kids and help them, and be beneficial to them, that you just need to be passionate about teaching, and be passionate about wanting to engage kids more. (teacher)

We were fortunate to have people like John Hogan [Big Picture coach] around that could ask us questions to help us reflect and keep us on track, it was very difficult, you are tempted to go back ... (Advisory teacher)

And having somebody come in [Big Picture coach] ... having an external consultant come in to work with staff and teachers on planning, implementation, answer questions, tell them they're doing okay, pat them on the back, all of those sorts of things, and I think that might be why this school has survived. (school leader)

I was a bit sceptical at first but now anybody who asks me about Big Picture, I always say, "Look, you've got to go to Yule Brook and at least sit down with someone and talk about Big Picture because it is as it says, one student at a time, is exactly what it is, each student works, they enjoy what they are doing and they're only learning what they want to learn". (parent)

You have to, like, literally chisel. Chisel away at all the baggage that's surrounding these kids to get them there. (Advisory teacher)

People have to feel really wanted, valued and that there is a chance for them to make a difference and turn something around. (school leader)

Understanding the 'roadblocks' and then taking on board the kinds of policies and practices we have heard about from innovative schools, principals and teachers is absolutely central to enhancing student engagement in low SES school communities. In the section to follow we attempt to identify some key lessons and recommendations from the YBC experience.

4.0 Learning for student engagement

4.1 Lessons

Drawing together some of the themes discussed so far, we now attempt to summarise the key lessons for education systems, schools and communities as they relate to enhanced student engagement in low SES school communities.

4.1.1 General

1. The phenomenon of student disengagement from schooling in low SES school communities is a persistent and protracted issue for increasing numbers of students and their families.
2. The traditional 'one size fits all' high school does not work for all students.
3. The cost of student disengagement to society and the individual is significant and long lasting.
4. Understanding the problem of student disengagement requires fresh thinking and action.
5. There is a need to move beyond deficit thinking to embrace all students 'at promise'.
6. Student disengagement from schooling is not a sign of inferior intellectual ability but a failure to provide appropriate pedagogical settings for engagement in learning.



4.1.2 Relationships

1. Student engagement in learning is a relational activity; there is no education without relation.
2. To engage all students, schools need to create a spirit of trust, respect and care towards all students.
3. The school's focus on relationships requires that at least one adult/teacher knows each student well.
4. Diversity is welcomed and inequity challenged.
5. Problems are named and worked through respectfully.
6. Families are an integral part of each student's learning journey.
7. Misbehaviour is dealt with in relation to its impact on people through restorative practice, not through a punishment model.

4.1.3 Pedagogy

1. Teaching and learning is challenging, rigorous and fun.
2. Students have a say in what and how they learn best.
3. School curriculum starts from where the students are at.
4. Students are given an opportunity to succeed.
5. Students demonstrate their learning in real world contexts.
6. Assessment is authentic and public.
7. Pedagogy is coherent, structured and consistent.
8. Pedagogy connects head, heart and hand.
9. Curriculum connects to students' lives, passions and interests.
10. Non-cognitive learning outcomes such as initiative, courage, self-esteem, health and wellbeing, confidence, efficacy, creativity and leadership are counted and valued. They are seen as necessary for academic learning to occur.

11. Curriculum is planned and monitored by those who know students best, teachers.
12. The obsessive emphasis on testing can damage the most marginalised and vulnerable students and communities.
13. Deficit stereotypes of students' academic ability are actively challenged and refashioned.

4.1.4 Community

1. School renewal is seen as a part of a wider process of active community capacity building.
2. Communities are viewed as an asset and resource rather than deficit and liability.
3. Schools work with, rather than against, local communities.
4. Families are intimately involved in each student's learning plan.
5. Each student has an expert community mentor linked to their passions and interests.
6. Schools acknowledge the ways in which social inequality impacts on student learning.
7. Schools are hubs of integrated service delivery for students and families.

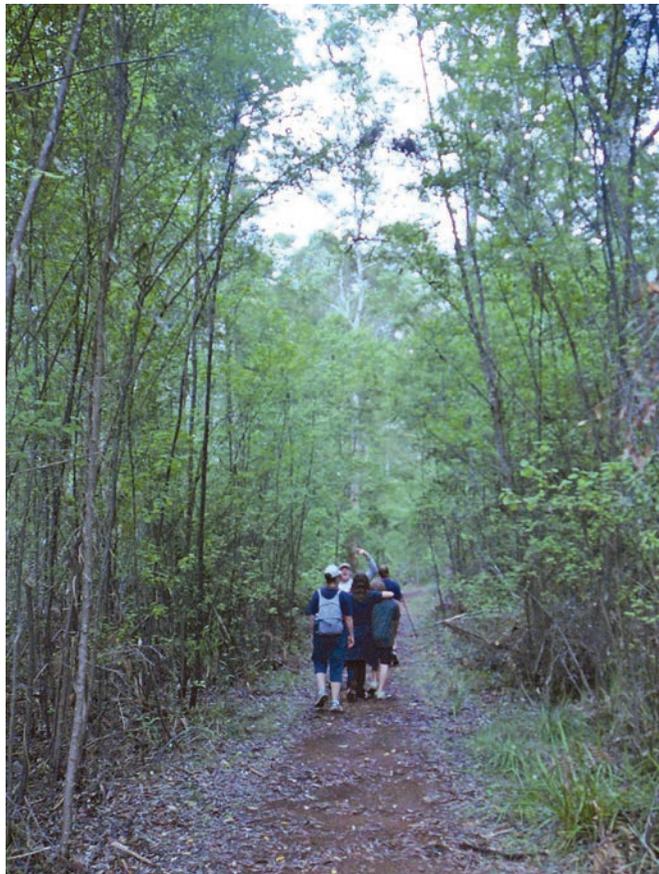
4.1.5 School structure

1. School structures and organisational requirements are flexible enough to accommodate students' needs, interests, part-time jobs and family responsibilities.
2. Small learning teams are developed to work with students over time.
3. Students are made to feel welcome and safe.
4. The built environment provides a strong sense of ownership, self-worth and achievement.
5. Rules and regulations are less bureaucratic and punitive and more personalised and respectful.
6. Students are connected to one teacher in Advisory for significant amounts of time.
7. Schools place less reliance on streaming and curriculum differentiation.
8. Teachers are seen as curriculum leaders with the vision and capacity to promote educational ideals in the school and wider community.
9. Schools and teachers see themselves as a part of a wider national and international network for school change.
10. School change takes time, energy and resources, both intellectual and physical.



4.1.6 Public policy

1. The limited focus on system-wide measures of success – NAPLAN scores – works to sideline the important educational advances of schools in many low SES communities.
2. Centrally mandated policies can serve to either constrain or enable student engagement in learning.
3. Schools are more likely to succeed when they are given the autonomy to focus on the pedagogical needs, passions and aspirations of students.
4. Schools should have ownership and responsibility for revitalising the curriculum and improving educational pathways and futures for students.
5. A culture of innovation and risk taking should be encouraged, well resourced and supported through a coherent policy framework.
6. Education systems demonstrate a willingness and capacity to connect research, policy and practice in ways that enhance school autonomy and innovation.
7. Public policy articulates the links between social justice, school resourcing and flexibility.
8. Governments, education systems, schools and teachers show a preparedness to critically reflect on and learn from experience.
9. Teachers' ideas and experience are respected in the policy process.
10. Principals and teachers are duly acknowledged, rewarded and promoted for innovation, risk taking and school improvement.
11. Education systems have a portfolio of schools rather than 'one size fits all'.
12. Education systems are open to alternative ways of 'doing' schooling for the least advantaged.
13. Small high schools can be an integral and cost effective part of the social inclusion agenda.



4.2 Recommendations

On the basis of the evidence presented in this report and the lessons learned from the innovative practices at YBC, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS, we can make a number of recommendations to enhance student engagement in low SES school communities.

1. That current standardised test score measures of school success (e.g NAPLAN) be augmented by instruments that recognise the difficulties of engaging students from low SES communities and take into account non-cognitive learning outcomes (see lesson 10, section 4.1.3)
2. YBC together with Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS be publicly acknowledged and commended as exemplar schools of innovation, student engagement and pedagogical achievement in low SES school communities
3. YBC and other innovative sites be actively encouraged, resourced and supported as mentor schools (hubs) to scale up reform efforts in low SES school communities
4. YBC be given Distinctive School status as an exemplar low SES small high school
5. YBC be funded to support and sustain the implementation of the Big Picture Education inspired model of student engagement
6. YBC continue to collaborate with Sevenoaks Senior College to support the extension of Year 11 and 12 as a part of its Plan of Progression, 2011-2014 with the option of establishing Year 11 and 12 Big Picture cohorts
7. YBC is not viewed as a repository for 'problem kids' because of its success in dealing with alienated students and families
8. YBC be funded to research its journey and achievements longitudinally for the benefit of the system and other schools in low SES school communities
9. That DoE investigate the costs and benefits of creating a portfolio of small high schools as a part of the regionalisation restructure and collaboration between clusters of schools
10. That DoE support YBC to extend its collaborative and cultural links with the community to enhance student engagement in learning
11. YBC design distinguishers based on personalised learning, mentorship, real world learning, independent learning plans and exhibitions become a focus of school renewal in low SES school communities
12. That DoE support YBC to host a national Big Picture Education conference in Perth to enable local schools and regions to learn about current national and international best practice around student engagement in low SES school communities



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