

Big Picture
EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

ONE STUDENT AT A TIME IN A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS...

Counting Success

2014

In framing the evaluation of Big Picture Education in Australia, the Research and Evaluation Committee supported qualitative research into the work of the schools. The report on this research, *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers**, is a separate document in the *Transforming learning and schools* package.

Big Picture has also been cognisant of the need to collect quantitative evidence, especially the data and information that is prominent in commentary about, and reporting of, student progress and school achievement. This report, *Counting Success*, presents this other data and information. It should be read alongside the qualitative research and particularly alongside the Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) publication *Stories Out of School*.

Sources of information

Big Picture and the Origin Foundation have devoted significant resources to finding the type of data and information that may be more familiar to casual observers of schools. This has meant mining existing sources of information and seeking to fill any remaining gaps.

In doing this we have relied on a number of indicators of progress and achievement at each individual school. The sources of these indicators include:

- Information from the first in-depth evaluation of Big Picture learning in Australia, the *Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project in Low SES Schools*, completed in 2010. The aim of this project was to identify, explain and assess policies and practices implemented at Yule Brook College - as well as at two additional sites - that appeared to be making a difference in terms of student engagement in low SES school communities.
- The document *Big Picture Learning in Australia – Some Early Indicators*. This presented pre-2011 information coming out of schools, especially showing the initial impact of Big Picture. (Available from Big Picture Education Australia)
- *Big Picture Schools in Tasmania, Preliminary Evaluation 2012* completed by Education Performance Services (EPS), Tasmanian Department of Education. (Available from Big Picture Education Australia)
- Data and other information gathered by schools during 2013 and 2014.
- Interim findings of a survey completed by Big Picture schools in late 2012/early 2013.
- The annual reports of the longest established Big Picture school, Yule Brook College, including information about the school's NAPLAN scores.

* Deb Hayes, Barry Down, Deb Talbot and Kathryn Choules *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers and teachers*. University of Sydney, November 2013. Available from Big Picture Education Australia.

Counting Success

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2014

HOW DO WE KNOW STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS ARE ACHIEVING?

NAPLAN

The most common achievement measure used to compare schools is NAPLAN scores. However, for most Big Picture schools NAPLAN scores are not a valid indicator of Big Picture learning outcomes. This is because the final NAPLAN tests (Year 9) are conducted just three months after students begin learning in a Big Picture advisory group.

The exception is Yule Brook College where the advisory groups start in Year 8; hence NAPLAN scores can be used as a contributing indicator of student progress and the results have proved to be reasonable and very encouraging. Yule Brook College in Western Australia is the longest established Big Picture school in Australia and is a conversion school, meaning that the whole school has been converted to the design.

NAPLAN scores have to be read carefully and there can be a 'cohort effect' that creates fluctuations from year to year, especially in smaller schools.

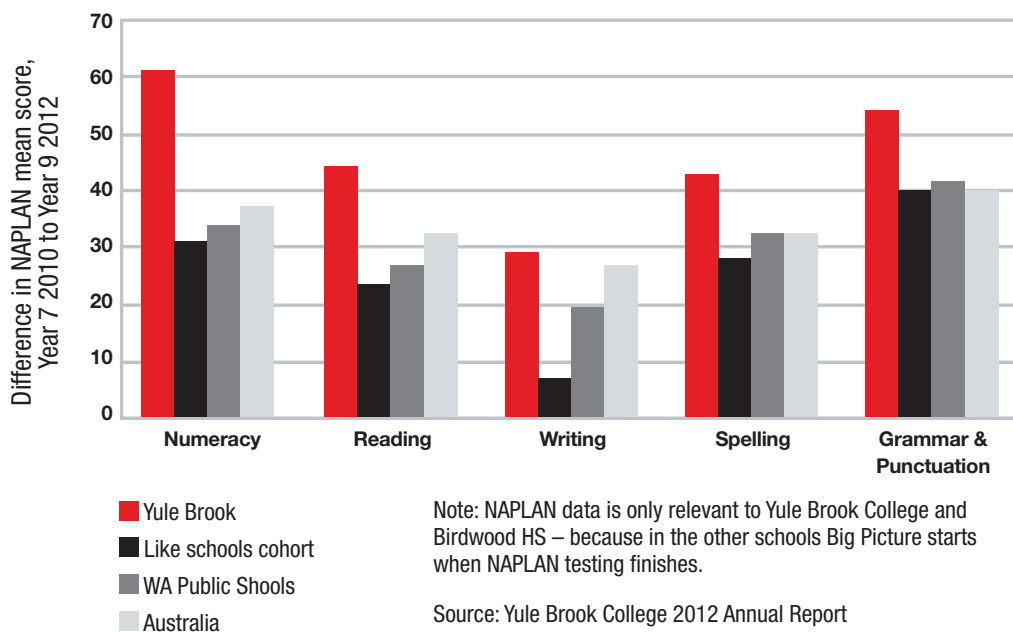
Yule Brook's earlier (2008-2010) NAPLAN profile most commonly placed it close to schools enrolling similar students, with fluctuations also evident from year to year. However the Year 9 scores in 2011 rose substantially in four of the five NAPLAN domains, and Year 9 numeracy scores were even above the Australian average. This group of students improved considerably between Years 7 and 9, illustrated by the closing gap between the test scores for these students and Australian average scores.

By 2012 it was evident that such gains were being sustained, again with some fluctuations. Graph 1 below summarises student gain in NAPLAN between Years 7 (2010) and 9 (2012).¹ Clearly, the gain for students compares most favourably with like schools, WA public schools and Australian schools.

The continuing improvement for Indigenous students has been especially encouraging, as indicated in Graph 2.

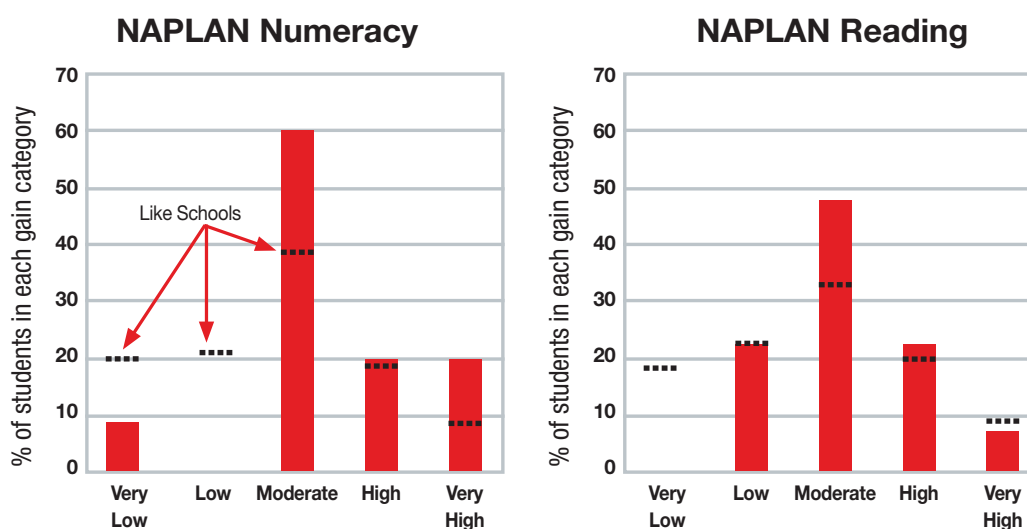
Graph 1. Information from NAPLAN Yule Brook College, 2012. How does achievement in NAPLAN compare?

Summary of student gain in NAPLAN 2010 – 2012 (Years 7-9)



**Graph 2. Information from NAPLAN, Yule Brook College, 2012.
Aboriginal students: progressing ahead of “like schools”.**

Progress between Years 7 and 9 Source: Yule Brook College 2012 Annual Report



Other measures of student achievement

Student achievement is measured in a variety of ways within and between schools. Improving student achievement in Big Picture schools is becoming increasingly apparent at the school level and is starting to show across Tasmania, the State with the most Big Picture schools. A report by Educational Performance Services in Tasmania (see Appendix 1) pointed to “some evidence of increased improvements in literacy and numeracy for some cohorts as measured by teacher assessment against the curriculum.”²

On student performance, the EPS report indicated that

- The Year 9 Big Picture students of 2010 performed as well as the State in English–literacy, finishing Year 10 with a rating measurably above the State average. The average change in ratings from year to year is slightly higher for the Big Picture students than for the State.
- In Mathematics–numeracy, the results indicate an improvement for students in their second year of Big Picture. Big Picture students performed below the State average before entering the Big Picture program and during the first two years. The average change in ratings from Year 8 to Year 9 was less than for the State but average change from Year 9 to Year 10 was higher for the Big Picture students than for the State.

With the support of the Department of Education in Tasmania, the Big Picture schools have agreed to share school-level information about student attainment. The following snapshots show that school-level indicators are both diverse and positive:

- Montrose Bay High School has both a mainstream campus and a Big Picture campus. The results of students in its Big Picture campus as mapped against the Tasmanian Curriculum Framework (TCF) are representative of the results of the whole school - significant in light of the additional challenges faced by many Big Picture students
- Launceston City Campus reports emerging evidence of improved engagement and attainment through grades 9-12 as measured against the TCF and the Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE). The school is confident that, the longer students and staff are involved in Big Picture learning, the stronger the attainment outcomes will become.
- A third school, Scottsdale High School, reports that 53.33% of its Big Picture students received academic excellence awards. This is over 20% higher than grade averages for all students. In 2010 the dux of the school was a student in the school’s Big Picture program.

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS DOING TO IMPROVE LEARNING?

Big Picture schools have made substantial changes to pedagogy and school organisation. Pedagogy refers to all those practices that affect what and how students learn and how teachers teach. The nature and extent of changes to pedagogy in Australia's first Big Picture school was first described in the *Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project in Low SES Schools*³ in 2010. The researchers noted how Yule Brook College (YBC) was emphasising high academic expectations for each and every student through the use of personalised learning plans. In this way, the school appreciated the importance of moving beyond a deficit view of students in low SES school communities, to a capabilities approach, which enabled them to make more powerful choices.

The researchers noted that there were two other practices at YBC that appeared to be making a significant difference in terms of student engagement in learning. Personalisation was being achieved by building learning around student passions and interests. Secondly, YBC was developing "authentic assessment" practices through the use of public exhibitions. This approach reaffirmed what most educators already know about good assessment.

What evidence did the researchers find that the pedagogy adopted at YBC was creating success? They concluded that there had been a marked shift for the better in academic performance, reflecting the kinds of relational, pedagogical, structural and community related conditions that were being created. They also noted some very encouraging trends at YBC in terms of "hard data".

As outlined in *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers*, Big Picture learning is centred on the small group advisory structure. The researchers who completed the *Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project in Low SES Schools* found that the Big Picture design, as implemented at YBC, was delivering results. Part of this, they concluded, was attributable to the small school and advisory size, as well as to the focus on teacher learning and development.

Based on the interview evidence, the researchers concluded that there was no doubt that the Big Picture Education design structures (distinguishers) adopted at YBC played a pivotal role in achieving enhanced levels of student engagement for learning as well as teacher development and learning. While the implementation

of the Big Picture design tends to vary between sites, most Big Picture schools are committed to personalised learning in small advisories.

While many schools have adopted practices similar to some Big Picture distinguishers, the significant difference is that the Big Picture design works best when all the distinguishers are implemented.

HOW DO WE KNOW STUDENTS ARE ENGAGED?

Most measures of student engagement are actually measures of disengagement, relying on indicators such as attendance and retention rates, and discipline problems. We consider such measures but it is very important to find out and measure positive engagement – and we do this.

The Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) survey of schools showed that all students complete a learning plan. This process is supported by advisory teachers, usually supported by parents and often supported by mentors. In doing this they use the learning goals of Big Picture Education; the BPEA survey revealed a significant student understanding of these goals. How many students in mainstream schools are able to understand and articulate their learning goals?

Student commitment to developing and continuing their interest projects is another good measure of their engagement. Almost all students develop interest projects and the benefits are noticeable: Big Picture schools report that 80% of students showed enhanced motivation through their projects; a similar percentage show enhanced expertise and 60% showed greater depth of learning. These projects and the learning become increasingly sophisticated from year to year.

Student assessment in Big Picture schools is partly through exhibition of their work by the students themselves to an audience including teachers, peers and parents. BPEA schools report that on average 92% of students regularly complete these exhibitions – the figure being much higher in the longer established Big Picture schools, including up to 100% at Montrose Bay High School. In almost all of these student exhibitions the learning embraces at least three of the learning goals and in the more established schools all five of the learning goals are incorporated. The vast majority of parents attend these exhibitions.

An important Big Picture distinguisher is 'learning through internships'. Participation in internships does vary between schools. This variation mainly reflects school practice and resources. Just over half of the students enrolled in Big Picture schools are completing internships. The most common pattern is for students who are in internships to participate just one day each week. 90% of the Big Picture students at Montrose Bay High School and 98% at Ogilvie High School take up this opportunity to work and learn within the community.

Big Picture schools report increased student motivation, arising out of participation in internships, for a large majority of the participating students. The biggest challenge is co-ordinating the internships; it is a substantial task and very few schools have the resources to employ a co-ordinator.

ARE STUDENTS STAYING THE DISTANCE?

Retention of students is an important indicator of their commitment to learning and achievement. Retention isn't easy to measure; high student mobility alone means that even when retention data exists it may not be accurate or complete. This is particularly the case where schools represent just one stage of learning and where students might move from one school or system to another. Students from schools as diverse as Yule Brook College (Western Australia) and Ogilvie High School (Tasmania), complete their secondary education in senior colleges.

The publication *Big Picture Schools in Tasmania, Preliminary Evaluation 2012*⁴ provided some indication of retention trends. Overall, the data provided tentative evidence for small positive outcomes in Year 10 to Year 11 retention for Big Picture students. It didn't find any overall evidence for improved retention into Year 12, but nor did it have sufficient data - the report stressed that the retention rates also do not include students who moved into the non-Government sector or Vocational Education and Training.

The report also drew attention to another problem in tracking Big Picture students: many participating in Big Picture may be at higher risk of not being retained into Year 12 and thus retention figures that seem low may still indicate a positive result.

Once again it is data gathered at the school level that provides some clues. Data from individual Tasmanian schools point to marked success in student retention:

- In 2011 and 2012 all the Big Picture students at Ogilvie High School (a 7-10 school) left Year 10 with a destination for Year 11. All students who wanted to enrol in a VET course were accepted.
- Montrose Bay High School reports that the Grade 10 to Grade 11 retention for the Big Picture students was 90% in 2011 and 92% in 2012.
- Launceston City Campus reports that the 2011 Grade 10 to 11 retention was 89%, falling to 82% during the year. The 2012 Grade 10 to 11 retention was also 89%, presumably with a similar fall-off during the year. This fall-off is common in secondary schools. But the direct retention of students from grade 10 in 2010 to the end of grade 12 at City Campus was 71%. This was over 10% higher than the average for Tasmania.
- Scottsdale High School reports that 100% of the 2012 Year 10 students in its Big Picture classes transited to eligible pathways, mostly to College or Polytechnic.

DO THEY BECOME QUALIFIED?

Across all schools Big Picture advisory teachers aim for students to meet existing qualification requirements for their career interests and/or further learning. Teachers map individual student progress against curriculum requirements - and students frequently receive formal instruction, particularly in core subject areas.

The progress made by students towards meeting state qualifications and certification, as well as their known post-school destinations, is a strong indicator of their achievement.

Launceston City Campus provided an early example of how students can meet qualification requirements in a different learning environment. To obtain the Tasmanian Certificate of Education, students must meet, or exceed, requirements in five key areas. Each level of learning is given a credit point value. Courses carry a range of credit values, depending on the level of study. A student needs 120 Tasmanian Qualification Authority (TQA) credit points to be awarded a TCE.

In its first year of operation City Campus showed how students could meet these requirements. In 2011 most students in the Year 11 advisory completed five or more courses. Among them they totalled six exceptional achievement level results, twelve higher achievements, five commendable achievements, and sixteen satisfactory achievements. Some students clearly struggled, but others expressed interest in going to university and were on track to do so, having completed or planned to complete, pre-tertiary courses and university foundation courses. This is an encouraging start given the difficulties students faced in their previous schooling. This positive start has continued: at the end of 2013 one third of grade 12/13 students at City Campus gained university acceptance. Two-thirds had achieved the points they needed for the TCE.

What of post-school destinations? It is notoriously difficult, but important, for schools to track the post-school destinations of their former students. The task is very labour-intensive and many students are very difficult to contact and track. Big Picture schools are relatively new and few have significant alumni, but they are now beginning to track their leavers.

Launceston City Campus has recorded the known destinations, as at March 2014, for a majority of the 203 who have left the school since it was established in 2011. Some others could be initially tracked, but not after the first year out of school.

137 of these 203 students are continuing in education. Thirty-three of these 137 are now in tertiary education, including ten enrolled in university. The remainder of those still in education are continuing at school (returning to City Campus or attending other schools) or are enrolled at Newstead College, which caters for students seeking tertiary entrance requirements (ATAR) or vocational certificates.

Around 17 of the 203 school leavers are in other work. This figure does not include those enrolled in TAFE in conjunction with employment. Forty-nine of the 203 could not be tracked or had other destinations.

It is very significant that two-thirds of all the students are continuing their formal education – quite an achievement for the City Campus students; at best, they were disengaged from learning in their previous schools. They now see the value of education.

HAS STUDENT ATTENDANCE IMPROVED?

Student attendance rates, in combination with other measures, say something about student and school achievement. Most student attendance data is presented in averages – school by school - as for example on the My School website. Judgments are often made about schools on the basis of comparative levels of average student attendance. Attendance is a useful indicator, but one which has to be looked at more closely. Every school principal, for example, knows that average attendance data can be impacted by sometimes just a handful of chronic non-attenders.

The Big Picture Education Australia survey provides some school-by-school information, with variations between (and sometimes within) schools according to student background, cohort size and school location (e.g. rural or urban). The small Big Picture enrolment at one Western Australian school, Thornlie Senior High School, records a 70% attendance rate – this rises to over 94% for the 77 students at Yea High School in rural Victoria. From other sources we know that the average attendance of 78% at Yule Brook College has improved over the years – but the average disguises a very noticeable rise in the number of students with attendance rates of over 90% (see following graph).

The average 84% attendance of students at Launceston City Campus is an improvement on the attendance of the same students in their previous school/s – the improvement is even more significant given the more disadvantaged profile of the enrolment at Launceston City Campus. In some schools, including Erindale College in Canberra and Scottsdale High in Tasmania, the attendance rates for Big Picture students are higher than for non-Big Picture students at the same school.

The EPS research in Tasmania indicated no clear pattern in the results for attendance, something that illustrates the problem when trying to average data across complex and diverse sites. Some students are in a Big Picture program while others are in a within-school Big Picture academy or in a stand-alone Big Picture school. The Tasmanian report observed that:

In order to evaluate attendance an additional approach is used for choosing a comparison group. Students should be put into groups based on patterns of attendance and background prior to Big Picture and attendance changes compared within those groups between those who participated and those who did not participate.⁵

Data from individual Tasmanian schools goes some way towards achieving this:

- Attendance of students in the Big Picture program at Ogilvie High School beginning in Year 9 improved from when they were in Years 7 and 8. In this school, student attendance rates in the Big Picture program compare favourably to attendance of students in the mainstream. In 2013 the attendance of students previously identified as causing concern improved for all but one student.
- Student attendance in the Big Picture Academy within Montrose Bay High School is high at 89%; even higher than the whole school average as indicated on the My School website.
- Student attendance at Launceston City Campus regularly shows an average 7% improvement over their attendance in their previous schools.
- Students in the Big Picture program at Scottsdale High School have the highest attendance rate in the school – but there is a set enrolment in the Big Picture classes so it is possible that student selection might contribute to these differences.

It should be noted that, according to the My School website, the average whole school student attendance rate for Tasmanian Government secondary schools is 88% (87% for metropolitan schools). In light of the profile of students in Big Picture programs the attendance rates for the above schools are impressive.

Earlier evaluations of Big Picture showed improvements in attendance over previous patterns. Prior to enrolment in the Glebe Pathways Project in Sydney, all of the students attended school less than 35% of the time. Some had not attended school for extended periods of time.

During Term 1 in 2011⁶:

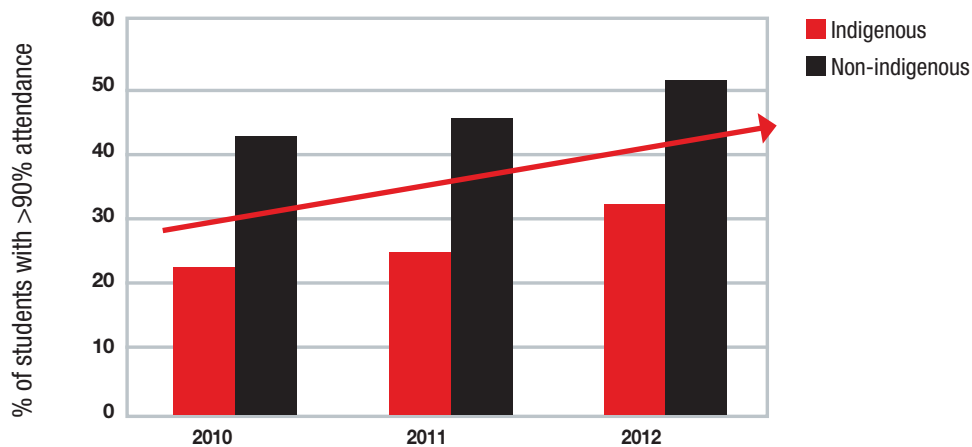
- 78% improved their attendance rates to over 50%
- 50% improved their attendance rates to over 65%
- 28% improved their attendance rates to over 70%

The annual reports from Yule Brook College continue to give encouraging news about student attendance. The graph below illustrates the increasing percentage of students achieving attendance rates of over 90%. As indicated on Graph 3, this improvement certainly attracted the attention of the Department of Education.

Graph 3. Yule Brook College, 2012. Attendance: on the up and up.

90% and above attendance – Semester 1, 2010

Source: Yule Brook College 2012 Annual Report



“the highest improvement in the percentage of students in the regular attendance category in secondary schools in the South Metropolitan Education Region”.

Regional Executive Director

Teachers involved in the more recently established Big Picture schools and programs have been keen to monitor attendance changes from the beginning. Teachers at Halls Head Community College in Western Australia report attendance gains for their students in Big Picture advisories: individual improvements in attendance ranged from 3% to 55%. They reported significant gains (averaging 18%) for students who were previously poor attenders.

Teachers at the new Cooks Hill Campus in Newcastle completed a methodical and detailed survey of student attendance in the school's first term in 2014:

- Average student attendance improved by 7% over attendance at students' previous schools.
- Around half of the surveyed students maintained a consistent attendance rate in their transition to the new school.
- A small number of students continued to be poor attenders.
- A significant one-third of students improved attendance on average by 27%.
- Individual attendance gains ranged from 1% to 58%.

The school was careful to note that there were many factors which impact on school attendance but their data shows overall increased attendance, with substantial improvement in the case of those considered chronic non-attenders in their previous schools.

WHAT ABOUT BEHAVIOUR AND DISCIPLINE?

Schools are familiar with the problems that often occur when students are disengaged. These problems also receive substantial attention from the media. What do we know about student behaviour in Big Picture schools?

Some early information was provided by the evaluation of the Glebe Pathways Project. Prior to enrolment in the Big Picture program more than 60% of students had received more than one short suspension. More than 35% had received more than one long suspension. The 2011 evaluation reported that subsequent to enrolling in the Pathways Project, only 10% of students had been suspended.⁷

Big Picture Education Australia followed up some of these issues in an online survey of principals of Big Picture schools in 2010 and 2011. Respondents to the two surveys reported noticeable improvement in student engagement in learning in Big Picture advisories, as well as in their completion of learning tasks. Some, or noticeable, improvement was reported in:

- Suspension/exclusion rate
- Daily attendance rate
- Number of discipline issues
- Engagement in the life of the school

In the words of one respondent:

"At times we forget how much the tone of our school has changed - it is most evident when visitors come and comment on: the engagement of the students, the calmness across the school, the cleanliness of the school and the lack of damage and graffiti."⁸

DO PARENTS PARTICIPATE IN THIS WAY OF DOING SCHOOL?

Participation of parents in the life and learning of the school is almost universally accepted as essential to improving student achievement. Big Picture Education requires this participation at key stages in the learning process, especially in student exhibitions.

One of the Big Picture Education distinguishers requires that families be enrolled too - to ensure that families are part of the learning lives of their children as well as the life of the school. The authors of the *Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project in Low SES Schools* in 2010 found that at a practical level, Yule Brook College committed significant resources to developing positive relationships with parents through a wide range of activities. When a student has an exhibition it is mandatory that a family member be present to be part of the assessment process.

The survey of BPEA schools shows that they are continuing to achieve very high rates of parent participation. An average of 90% of students in the responding schools had at least one parent/carer attending their exhibitions.

Additional information shared by Tasmanian schools shows very high levels of parent participation in student exhibitions of their learning:

- Between Feb 2009 and Aug 2013 a minimum of one parent attended 166 of the 167 exhibitions held at Scottsdale High School – a participation rate of over 99%
- In 2012 an average of 97% of students at Ogilvie High School had parents/carers attend exhibitions each term.
- In 2011 – 2012 an average of 95.5% of students at Montrose Bay High School had parents/carers attend every round of exhibitions. In 2013 parents were invited to be part of a Learning Plan development meeting and 90% of parents attended this meeting in term 1.
- At least 90% of Launceston City Campus parents attended every round of exhibitions through 2011 and 2012. City Campus also reports that around 80% of parents now participate in the development of personalised learning plans.

The nature of this participation raises the quality of parent-teacher interaction to a much higher level. The BPEA survey of schools revealed that parental visits to the schools are positive interactions involving students – rather than required participation in recurring crisis meetings. Respondents were asked to consider the many reasons why parents visit Big Picture schools. They judged that 65% of these visits related to student exhibitions and 17% related to other aspects of learning or activities supporting the school. Just 14% were linked to a problem or issue facing the student. Respondents in schools with both Big Picture and mainstream students judged that there was much more contact with parents and carers of the Big Picture students.

HOW DO STUDENTS AND PARENTS PERCEIVE THEIR SCHOOL?

One of the things explored in *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers* was student perceptions about themselves and their experiences at school. The research clearly showed that students strongly felt that: their work and standards had improved, they were more motivated, they were doing more work - and learning.

As the Big Picture teachers at Ogilvie High School report:

The feedback from students in their Learning Journals, during advisory, in casual conversations with advisory teachers and in Town Hall sessions is consistently positive. They report being excited about units of work and happy to be at school. During the year, we have picked up a number of students who were disengaged from [the mainstream] school ... all of whom are coming regularly to school now and are engaged in the program. Feedback from parents and carers during phone calls, and especially as a part of exhibitions, is warm and supportive of the aims of the program.⁹

Student perceptions of their school were measured in the first year of the establishment of Launceston City Campus in Tasmania. The 2010 and 2011 *Insight SRC* school improvement survey interpretive reports, managed and issued by the Tasmanian Department of Education, provided a useful snapshot of student, parent and teacher attitudes to a number of areas of school operation. In particular the reports show how students, parents and teachers responded to a significantly different way of doing school.

The students who enrolled at Launceston City Campus came from a variety of both government and non-government schools. Their survey responses showed that they particularly valued a number of features of their new school: especially the stimulating learning atmosphere, the opportunities in thinking and learning, the style of teaching and the positive classroom atmosphere.

The parents felt that the teachers were approachable and that learning was stimulating. They felt that students were motivated. They appreciated the way in which the school managed matters such as student behaviour and safety. Teachers were also surveyed and clearly were responding well to the noticeably different context in which they were now working.

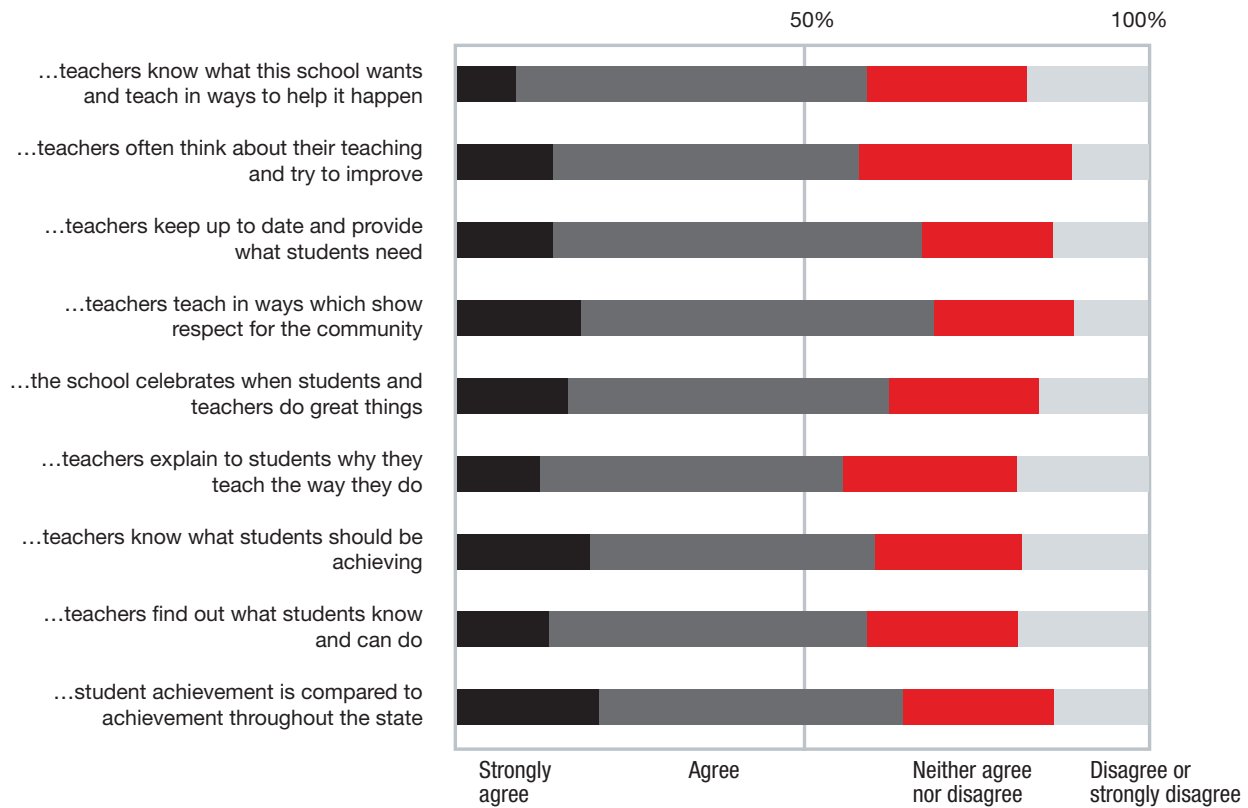
The ways in which City Campus was judged by staff, students and parents were, and still are, especially apparent in the key areas of engagement and learning. Both these key areas are central to the very purpose of Big Picture learning.

The judgments of students and parents are always a good indication of the regard in which teachers and schools are held. Schools frequently conduct surveys of students and parents and Yule Brook College in Perth is no exception. The results of the school's most recent surveys¹⁰ are illustrated in graph 4.

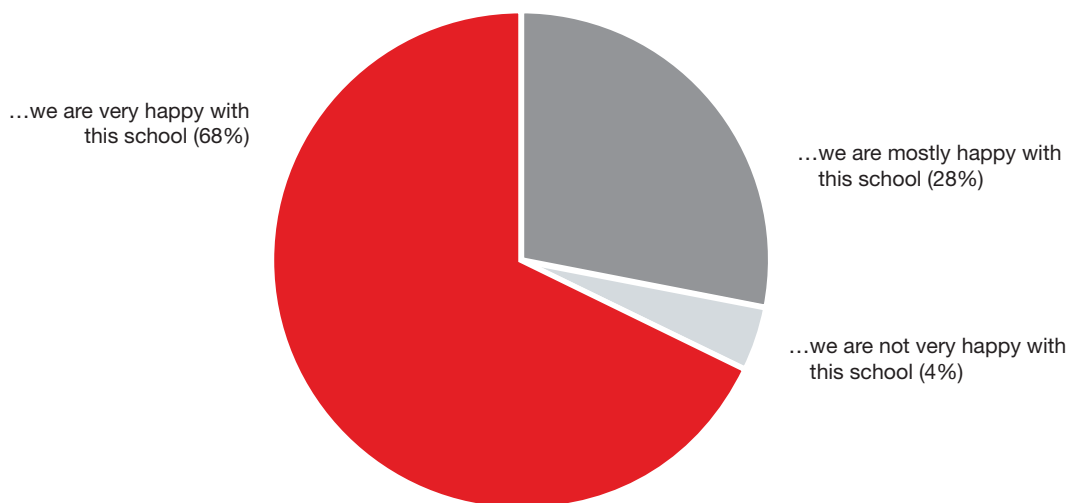
Graph 4. Yule Brook College, 2012. Students and parents: We like this school

STUDENTS ARE ASKED IF...

AND THEY AGREE



PARENTS SAY ...



Source: Yule Brook College 2012 Annual Report

Survey results such as these would be considered by most schools to be very encouraging. They are even more so for this school with an ICSEA value of 853 and which, just seven years ago, was making almost no progress against a tide of multiple disadvantages.

Finally, as well as considering stakeholder attitudes to the school, what can we say about perceptions – especially those held by students – to the Big Picture design as it is being applied in their school? This is explored in *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers*. Also a survey conducted amongst the 13 students enrolled in a Big Picture elective program at Balmain High School provides an interesting insight. The survey was constructed using a framework of students' expectations of school provided by Washor and Mojkowski.¹¹

The survey found that students value individualism and choice in learning. They feel that they are challenged in the Big Picture program: they can explore and learn at their own pace and in a different sequence. This is not their experience of mainstream schooling. The students surveyed were in a selective school... students of any ability level can switch off learning if too many limits are placed around what they can do.

WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN?

Big Picture schools, including students as well as teachers and parents, gather together each year for a national conference. This provides an opportunity to share ideas about practice and discuss solutions to emerging challenges. In addition, the principals of Big Picture schools in Tasmania also meet to develop and share strategies to evaluate progress in their schools. Following are some of the challenges presented by schools on these occasions:

- Achieving and sustaining a viable enrolment and resource provision.
- Strengthening the design implementation to establish the desired culture and practice.
- Supporting a small staff team through the significant demands of establishing what is a new learning provision, including the training of new staff.
- Raising the awareness and promoting an informed understanding of the school and Big Picture in the wider community.

- Building an understanding of the place of the Internship Program in a young person's learning, skilling mentors to take on the role - and finding new ways to build partnerships.
- Gathering and disseminating more data on achievement, attendance and retention that confirms the program's success.
- Measuring and communicating the evidence of the transformation of some students from disengaged young people to empowered, positive and competent learners and citizens.
- Supporting a small team to develop efficacy and understanding of the change agenda including implementation of the Australian Curriculum.
- Supporting and acknowledging our mentors and building long-term partnerships. Strong partnerships with individuals, community groups and businesses are vital to the success of the internship program, which is a key feature of Big Picture Education.
- Managing the substantial emotional, personal and time commitments of the advisory teachers and managing the workload without lessening what is offered through the program.

The schools also contributed some **key lessons** in their implementation of Big Picture. These include:

- The importance of the vision being collectively owned and supported – within and among schools. A shared understanding about the vision, practice, learning and behaviour support needs to be developed over time.
- The implementation of an innovation (the understandings, desired practice and culture) takes several years.
- While it may take several years to achieve high levels of improvement on all desired outcomes, improvements can be observed and described by students, families, teachers and mentors from the early days of enrolment in Big Picture Education.
- Additional resourcing is required in the early phases of implementation.
- Differentiation and personalisation in Big Picture has influenced the teaching and learning programs across the school.
- Importance of networking, which enables both greater support of small teams working through the challenges of early implementation and ongoing strengthening of practice.

- Leadership is critical to successful implementation.
- Establishing significant community partnerships enables broader based awareness, support, and opportunity.
- Implementing the Big Picture design requires a re-conceptualization by students, parents, teachers, leaders and the community.
- The longer that a student is learning within the Big Picture Education design, the greater the outcome improvement; four years of engagement is ideal.
- While each element of the design viewed in isolation will add value to the learning experience of students, the effects from interconnectedness of all elements of the design will be more profound.
- The development of a professional learning community is essential for successful implementation. While this takes place predominately within the school context, external learning inputs, including local and national Big Picture networking, are important opportunities.
- The diversity of schools, as well as their required small size, has also made it difficult to describe average characteristics and achievement of Big Picture schools; hence, the need to show snapshots of achievement in individual schools. It is certainly a caution to those who rely on limited and averaged data to draw conclusions about schools or even groups of schools.
- The qualitative research showed how students, parents/carers and teachers talked about their experience in Big Picture schools and concluded that the reported benefits were greater than the perceived costs. The levels of student and school achievement described in *Counting Success*, and also in the document *Stories Out of School*, reinforce the messages about the benefits of Big Picture.
- According to the qualitative research, “students reported enjoying learning and increasing confidence in their ability to learn.” This is well supported by the information in *Counting Success* – particularly about student engagement and improvements in student behaviour as well as in attendance and retention. It is also supported by the information we have about student achievement.

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE?

This document, *Counting Success*, uses available numerical data and other information from diverse sources to tell more of the story about Big Picture Education. It is essentially about quantitative measures.

In reaching conclusions it is also important to refer to some of the conclusions in the qualitative research, *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers*. The qualitative research and its phenomenological approach have set an important standard in evaluation of school programs.

One document scans the available numerical data and other information from diverse sources; the other researches schools in depth and tells a story, which numbers alone cannot do. To what extent have they reached similar findings?

- In *BPEA: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers*, the researchers pointed to the diverse ways in which Big Picture learning was being implemented in the schools. Information in this document, *Counting Success*, also points to this diversity. The uniqueness of each school is inevitable. The challenge for Big Picture is to accommodate this uniqueness with the required commitment to the twelve distinguishers that are essential to the success of Big Picture learning.

- The qualitative research was better able to explore improved relationships in schools, a core claim and achievement of Big Picture:

“Other benefits included the smaller and more personal scale of BPEA schools. For students, these benefits extended beyond structures, such as advisories, and included improved relationships, not just with their teachers but also with their peers, and more involvement of parents/carers in learning processes.”¹²

This conclusion is supported by a combination of information sources in *Counting Success*.

- The qualitative research referred to the nature and impact of greater participation of parents/carers in the learning processes. Other information derived from sources in *Counting Success* strongly supports their findings of increased participation and the benefits that flow to students and schools.
- The qualitative research found that students readily identified a sense of purpose, meaning and engagement in their learning, especially as it related to their interests and career aspirations.

“They demonstrated a sense of ownership and control over their learning, and were able to explain why learning in BPEA was important to them.”¹³

The encouraging and often substantial improvements in student attendance and retention certainly support such findings.

- The qualitative research also pointed to ways in which the implementation of Big Picture learning needs to improve. It mentioned some instances of poor communication, need for greater access to subject area specialists and access to internships. Such findings illustrate the importance of in-school research and evaluation as a catalyst to real school improvement. While some information in *Counting Success* also points to required improvement - especially in internships - it shows that crunching numbers alone concerning schools can be a blinkered approach to school improvement.

The conclusion to the qualitative research report stated that it:

“adds to the body of evidence about the kinds of structural, organisational, pedagogical and community related conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained to enhance student engagement in learning.”¹⁴

The information in *Counting Success* strongly suggests that these conditions are indeed being created in Big Picture schools, academies and programs. The evidence about enhanced student engagement, as well as the measurable achievement of students and schools, is strongly illustrating the benefits of Big Picture learning.

Chris Bonnor

For the Big Picture Education Australia Research and Evaluation Committee
May, 2014

APPENDIX 1: The search for data

The Research and Evaluation Committee set itself the task of exploring existing information sources as well as collecting additional data and information about student and school achievement.

The existing data available from Tasmania, the jurisdiction with the largest number of Big Picture schools, was initially central to the search for quantitative evidence about the impact of Big Picture learning. Education Performance Services (EPS) undertook analysis of the data held by the Tasmanian Department of Education. The EPS produced an executive summary at the end of 2012 and a preliminary evaluation in 2013.

The EPS set out to aggregate data about the achievement of Big Picture students and schools, and assess the extent to which the achievement of these students varied from students in mainstream schooling. It proved to be a very difficult task and the difficulties need to be understood by those interested in what can and what cannot be easily assessed using student and school achievement data.

The executive summary of *Big Picture Schools in Tasmania, Preliminary Evaluation 2012* states the problem:

The evaluation of Big Picture in Tasmanian schools is complex. In part, this stems from one of Big Picture's (BP) very strengths; namely its ability to be implemented in a diversity of school settings. In Tasmania, BP schools are located in a range of communities with varying socioeconomic circumstances, with the BP program catering for students from a variety of backgrounds. As a result, the effect of BP in different settings may have different outcomes; this can lead to 'averaging out' of observed outcomes when looking across all BP schools.¹⁵

The almost inevitable result was a report that, with the time and resources available for the work, pointed to promising outcomes of students enrolled in Big Picture, but couched its findings in a number of caveats while stressing the need for more and deeper analysis.

In effect, the averaging of data from five very diverse schools showed "no clear pattern in the results for attendance". The EPS found "some evidence of increased improvements in literacy and numeracy for some cohorts as measured by teacher assessment against the curriculum." It found "tentative evidence for small positive outcomes in Year 10 to Year 11 retention for Big Picture students" but a lack of available data held by EPS limited any conclusions beyond Year 11.¹⁶

Big Picture schools have become increasingly conscious of the need to gather and interpret additional school-level data, within the constraints created by small sample sizes and noisy data. The improvement of data gathering at the school level will help deal with some of the complexities in the way Big Picture is implemented. In some cases this is across a whole school; in others as an academy and in still others as a program. As the qualitative research (*Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers*) has shown, there are also differences between schools in the extent to which the twelve Big Picture Distinguishers are implemented.

So, in the search for indicators of student and school achievement, BPEA has faced problems at two ends of the scale: the diversity of schools and variations in how the design is implemented limits the value of averaging of data across schools – while measuring outcomes at the school level has to cope with small samples and noisy data. The Tasmanian research shows that, without substantial additional work, it verges on wishful thinking to rely on available numerical data alone to enable definitive and accurate statements about achievements of a complex program administered in sometimes different ways in a diversity of sites with small numbers of students.

This challenges the assumptions of those who measure the achievement of programs and schools in test scores and other reportable data, as indicated on the My School website.

It makes a case for:

- Far more research using the methodology employed in *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/carers & teachers*. This is particularly the case when the program being researched aims to improve student engagement and commitment to learning at and beyond school so that young people can secure a sustainable livelihood. Raw scores and other numbers alone are not enough.
- More sophisticated research into available school data and better gathering and use of data at the school level. The EPS Preliminary Evaluation made excellent suggestions on how to achieve this, concluding that any future evaluative work should consider the following:
 - Using Year 11/12 outcomes data
 - Exploring other data analysis methodologies
 - Collecting other data, e.g. measures in the affective domain
 - Using case study/qualitative work

- Diversifying the types of data and other information that we value, collect and publish about student progress. As the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) puts it: “In Australia, we lack appropriate measures of engagement with learning and in their absence we are reliant on measures of educational performance.”¹⁷

APPENDIX 2: A diversity of schools and students

When evaluating the achievement of Big Picture schools and programs it is important to know the family and social profile of enrolled students.

The report on the qualitative research *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/ carers & teachers* indicated that Big Picture schools and students in Big Picture programs reflected considerable diversity of schools and students. The schools visited by the researchers included those in all three Big Picture categories: Big Picture Schools, Big Picture Inspired Schools, and Big Picture Exploring Schools. This research also reported on teacher perceptions of the types of students enrolled in Big Picture, especially in relation to their learning problems, lack of skill development and often poor social skills.

Information from other sources suggests that Big Picture schools or programs are more characteristically found in lower SES communities. The *My School* website¹⁸ shows that the ICSEA of Yule Brook College, a conversion school, is 853. Montrose Bay High School has an ICSEA of 891; Jordan River Learning Community (854), Scottsdale High School (939), and St John’s Park High School (946).

Some schools are closer to the ICSEA average. Belmont High School in Newcastle is 975, Ogilvie High School in Hobart is 990, Wanniasa School 970 and Erindale College 1003. One Big Picture program is located in a relatively advantaged school: Balmain Campus of Sydney Secondary College (ICSEA 1102).

The enrolment at Yule Brook College isn’t necessarily typical of that found in Big Picture schools, but it amply illustrates the challenges created by students who are disengaged. The researchers who completed the *Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project* in 2010 noted that the College had a remarkable concentration of students who face complex and challenging circumstances. The issues it faced included:

- High levels of student disengagement and absenteeism.
- High incidence of mental health and behavioural issues amongst students.
- Low levels of literacy and numeracy.
- Low levels of parental engagement.
- Lack of an achievement culture with high aspirations for academic success.¹⁹

These issues are faced disproportionately by students enrolled in many Big Picture programs within mainstream schools compared to the rest of the school population. Big Picture programs and academies within schools draw from a portion of each school’s enrolment. All but one of the Tasmanian Big Picture schools report that their Big Picture enrolment disproportionately includes students with greater emotional and learning needs.

As a consequence whole school ICSEA values don’t necessarily describe the background of students enrolled in the Big Picture programs or academies. Information from other sources shows that, compared with the school’s mainstream enrolment, the Big Picture students are usually less advantaged and/or have not achieved success in mainstream settings.

The background of students in Big Picture programs is further explained in some detail in *Big Picture Learning in Australia – Some Early Indicators*, especially in the sections on the Glebe Pathways project, Launceston City Campus and in the case studies.

(Endnotes)

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- 2 Educational Performance Services Big Picture Schools, Preliminary Evaluation 2012 Tasmanian Department of Education
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