

# The Big Picture design for learning and school



**BIG**  
PICTURE  
LEARNING  
INTERNATIONAL  
NETWORK

**Big Picture**  
EDUCATION AUSTRALIA  
ONE STUDENT AT A TIME IN  
A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS



## What is Big Picture and how is the design implemented?

Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) was established in 2005 and had one school by 2006. We now work with over 50 schools. More and more educators and schools are making contact and want to start conversations with us. We hope that this brochure can provide sufficient background information to inform those interested parties.

What follows is based on our 10 years of experience at doing the work in Australia. We know that implementing and embedding the BPE design in any educational context is hard work. It takes a lot of time and energy. The experience gained has shown us just what works and what does not. We know that success is best achieved when teachers, schools and communities are all on board and willing to work side by side with us.

The purpose of this overview is to answer the following questions:

1. What is BPEA?
2. What is the BPE design for learning and school?
3. Who is the BPE design for?
4. In what ways do schools/sites implement the BPE design?
5. How do schools/sites work with BPEA to implement the design?



## What is BPEA?

Big Picture Education Australia is a not-for-profit network of educators implementing a distinctive design for schools in a range of different community settings. Our purpose is to influence vital changes in education. Our motivation is that too many of our young people are not achieving their potential. Many are not engaged in school learning and some do not complete school. BPEA is supported by philanthropy, government, project partnerships, network membership and payment for services.

We don't own or manage schools. We work with education systems and schools to adapt the innovative BPE design to fit various contexts. Across Australia there are over 50 sites exploring and implementing the BPE design. These are new schools, existing schools converting to BPE, Big Picture Academies within schools, and other places trying to improve learning.

BPEA was founded by Viv White and John Hogan with the support of a committed and experienced team of innovators. Their interest in, and focus on, whole school change around a set of design distinguishers arose out of the deficiencies of previous sporadic and often piecemeal interventions. They drew on the success of Big Picture Learning (BPL) in the United States, especially through the work of Elliot Washor and Dennis Littky. White and Hogan have reshaped the distinguishers of BPL to further emphasise academic rigour. They also developed an implementation process to reflect their own experience of successful school innovation. Big Picture schools in several countries maintain close contact through the Big Picture Learning International Network (BPLIN).

## What is the BPE design for learning and school?

Big Picture schools educate one student at a time, within a community of learners. They are living proof that all young people, and especially our under-served students, can succeed in school. This happens by adhering to four basic principles:

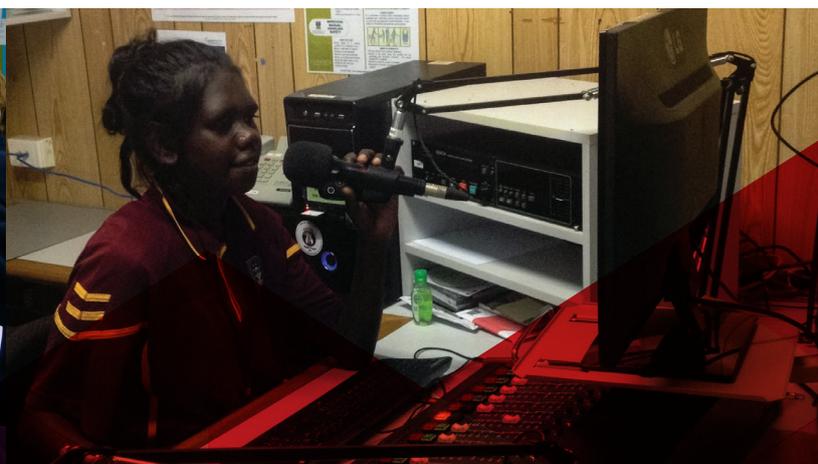
1. Learning must be based on each student's interests and needs.
2. Curriculum must be relevant to the students and allow them to do real work outside of school.
3. Students must connect to adult mentors outside school who share their interests and support their learning.
4. Students' development and abilities must be measured by the quality of their work and how this work changes them.

Every day we strive to form deep ties that connect students, teachers, families, mentors and the entire community. We devote extra time and energy to helping our students succeed in high school and go beyond, into further learning or work. This is why Big Picture Education works.

BPE students learn together in small groups, called advisories, with an advisory teacher who guides the same group for a number of years. A parent or adult advocate of each student is also enlisted as an active resource for the school community. All students help create their own curriculum, a personal one, that reflects and expands their own interests and aspirations. The school days include off-campus internships generated from each student's interests. This real-life training could be in a law office, an art studio, a research laboratory, a hospital, or a national park - it could be anywhere.

BPE students also take on further education including courses in various certificates and at TAFE and university. Each term they exhibit their work to their advisory teacher, peers, parents, mentors and others in the community. Students help each other to reinforce their individual passions for work in the real world. The result is a self-teaching community of learners where no one feels left out. BPE students learn how to enhance their self-determination and become intrinsically motivated learners.

There are a number of design elements that, in combination, distinguish BPE from other designs of schooling. These elements or 'distinguishers' influence everything that advisory teachers, leaders, students and families do in a Big Picture school or program - and this extends to the way the school is structured, managed and operated. Educators will recognise all the distinguishers. Indeed, some have characterised innovative practice for years. But it is every single one of the distinguishers, in combination, which creates a breakthrough strategy.





# The 12 distinguishers

## 1. Academic rigour: head, heart and hand

Big Picture schools have a strong intellectual purpose for each and every student. Students are continually challenged to deepen their learning and improve their performance across five learning goals: quantitative reasoning, empirical reasoning, social reasoning, communication skills and personal qualities. A high standard of academic work is expected of all students.

## 2. Leaving to learn: learning through internships

Students work two days a week in an interest-based internship with a mentor from the community on an intellectually rigorous real-world project that is connected to their learning goals.

## 3. Personalisation: one student at a time

With the help of the advisory teacher and parents, each student develops a learning plan that explores their interests and passions, and identifies personal learning goals, authentic project work and wider curriculum requirements. This plan is reviewed and updated regularly.

## 4. Authentic assessment

Each term the students exhibit their portfolios of work to a panel made up of the advisory teacher, family, peers, the mentor, and others from the community. They provide evidence of progress against their learning goals and they reflect on the process of their learning.

## 5. Collaboration for learning

Students work in one-on-one or small group learning environments around their interests both inside and outside the school. Through internships, the community plays an integral role in the education of the students.

## 6. Learning in advisory

Students are in an advisory group of no more than 17 students and an advisory teacher. They stay in the same advisory for much of their secondary education. The advisory teacher manages each student's learning plan and ensures that all learning goals and the National Curriculum are covered.

## 7. Trust, respect and care

One of the striking things about Big Picture schools is the ease with which students interact with adults in both the school and the wider community. A culture of trust, respect and care is shared between students and adults, as well as among students themselves.

## 8. Everyone's a leader

In Big Picture Schools, leadership is shared among the principal, staff, students, family, and community partners. Opportunities for leadership are created for everyone.

## 9. Families are enrolled too

Big Picture schools aim for real family engagement. Parents or carers are regarded as essential members of the learning team, beginning with the application process and progressing through to learning plan development, exhibitions and graduation.

## 10. Creating futures

All students are expected to graduate from school to further learning. They are prepared for, and connected to, opportunities for learning at university and/or other further education.

## 11. Teachers and leaders are learners too

New ideas constantly emerge as part of the learning cycle process. Teachers and leaders in Big Picture schools and programs regularly attend to new ideas and learn new ways of working. They develop reflective practice and find ways of sharing this learning with others.

## 12. Diverse and enduring partnerships

A Big Picture School has a strong focus on building and creating external partnerships. These include partnerships with: the family, mentors, local councils, businesses, universities, TAFE colleges and other training providers. These partnerships give students the opportunities to pursue their learning and achieve their goals.



## BPE: a design for everyone

The BPE design is for all students. There are no limits - any student, any age, anywhere, any site.

We have schools, academies and programs in our network that demonstrate this every day and every year. We are working with schools in the city, in suburban areas, in regional, rural and remote communities.

Unsurprisingly though, most interest in the BPE design to date has come from those working with young people who have disengaged from learning and school, whether quietly (conforming but bored) or noisily (acting out in school or just not going).

Furthermore, there is a demographic bias of BPE activity in our network. The design is being disproportionately implemented in schools and sites located in lower socio-economic status (SES) communities. Social justice is a priority for us at BPEA and we are committed to working with these students. However, it is very unfair on any school in a low SES area to be labelled as a school with only disengaged students. That is not accurate and not right. Furthermore, all schools – wherever they are located - have young people who are disengaging from learning and school.

Taken at face value, these biases appear to contradict our claim of a design for all. However, the reality is that change is more commonly sought in places that are most needy. Because of this we have met many in the wider community who only hear about BPE as a design for disengaged students. This is not correct.

The BPE design works in many different learning contexts. The design can underpin a special focus academy/school (like STEM, Performing Arts, or Music). It makes for a robust frame for a Gifted and Talented Program. It is now possible to gain entry to many universities using a BPE School Graduation Portfolio, and the design itself can also work in university settings. College Unbound, an initiative of Big Picture Learning (BPL) in the USA, has been awarded accreditation for an arts degree. There are primary schools that have adopted and implemented the design. BPL in New Zealand was begun in a very large distance education college.

The BPE design works for anyone.

*“We prepare young people uncommonly well for life after school, while they are at school”*

(Elliot Washor, Co-founder, Big Picture Learning)

## In what ways do schools/sites implement the BPE design?

The power of the BPE design is that it can be, and needs to be, adapted to suit the context. The context of a remote community is not the same as that of the inner city. A small academy in a larger school is not the same as a stand-alone school. A group beginning BPE in year 10 is not the same as starting on the journey in year 7. BPE is not something to just be inserted, dropped in or pasted in. Because of this we have ended up with some different structures and different categories of sites.



### FOUR STRUCTURES

- 1. Start-up new stand-alone BPE schools:** two examples in Australia are Cooks Hill Campus in Newcastle and the Launceston Big Picture School.
- 2. Existing schools:** implementing and integrating the design across the school (BPE Conversion Schools). This includes high schools and primary schools in urban, rural and remote contexts.
- 3. BPE Academies:** inside larger schools.
- 4. BPE Programs:** independent of a school. For example a gateways project for unemployed young people at a university, a community centre program for indigenous women to re-engage with community and learning, and a city youth program in a community centre.

### FOUR CATEGORIES

- 1. Big Picture:** schools, academies and programs that implement and integrate the whole design into the way they work as a school. These schools are examples of the design at work. They lead the way for all our work in every context.
- 2. BPE Inspired:** schools and academies adopt most but not all of the key elements of the design or adopt all the elements for only some of the time.
- 3. BPE Exploring:** schools are learning about the BPE design with a view to implementation.
- 4. Member of BPLIN:** this includes all of the above schools and many others that are interested in being connected to our work. They like our ideas, materials, workshops and conferences but they are not *doing BPE*.

### THREE NEW CATEGORIES OF SCHOOL ARE EMERGING

- 1. Adopting some key elements/distinguishers:** we work with some large schools that are not BPE schools but that use the BPE approach to one or more key ideas, elements or distinguishers. They might use project based learning, assessment by exhibition, personal learning plans, Big Picture as an elective, or internships as a career/enterprise opportunity. As schools proceed they pay attention to the culture, practices and structures that enable or block doing this work well. They may in time decide to pursue more of the design and become a BPE Inspired school. Many of these schools are too large to redesign into smaller BPE schools and many don't want to change what they provide for most of the students. But they are interested in development of teaching and learning and improving student engagement.
- 2. The BPEA Professional Learning School:** some of our schools host and hold professional learning and training activities on behalf of BPEA. Schools only achieve this status after extensive negotiation with BPEA.
- 3. The BPEA Accredited School:** after some years of operation and successfully demonstrating the full implementation of the BPE design, a school can work with BPEA to be accredited as a BPE School.

*This is a breakthrough strategy that engages young people and encourages them to do their best. It involves the school and the teachers. It involves the family and the community. Over time it transforms community.*

# How do schools/sites work with BPEA to implement the design?

There is work to do. It takes a long time; it takes commitment; it takes persistence; it takes resourcing. People have to explore and understand the design and make sense of it for their context. They must plan how to start and be prepared to continue to develop and evolve until the design is embedded.

BPEA does not endorse, or wish to participate in, unsupported fast growth of partial implementation. We know that BPE works. We have the research, the evidence and the experience. We also know that to implement the design in a way that is integrated into the practice of everyone in the school takes time (years), support (training and coaching), commitment (by leaders, not just teachers) and a network of schools, groups and people that help each other.

People often say 'you don't know what it is like here'. They are right and that is why we can't tell them exactly what to do. There is new work to be done in each and every setting. The community knows the context well. BPEA knows the design well. So we need to work together.

## PHASE 1: EXPLORING

The school explores the BPE design and BPEA learns more about the school:

- school contacts BPEA.
- a conversation between BPEA and school leadership follows.
- BPEA visits the school (travel costs required).
- school staff enrol in and complete introductory training modules
- where necessary, BPEA provides an introductory workshop, seminar and/or presentation and/or hosts a school visit to an existing BPE context (both of these options come at a cost).

## PHASE 2: GETTING STARTED

- Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Collaborative Agreement (CA). This describes what the school aims to do and why, the future plans and collaboration arrangements over five years. The MOU/CA includes an agreement about the use of the title BPE.
- Develop a Services Agreement (SA). This describes the support and cost required for the school to enact its plan.
- All staff involved, including school leadership, do the Foundation Program.
- BPEA and school run a Planning Workshop.

## PHASE 3: IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation process (as outlined in the plan developed in Phase Two) begins. This also includes ongoing participation in the BPE network and support by a BPEA school coach. It requires that all new staff do the Foundation Program and, where appropriate, the school joins in BPE network activities.

## PHASE 4: INTEGRATION AND REVIEW

Towards the end of the first MOU the school and BPEA do a review of the work. A new planning workshop follows and a new MOU/SA is developed.

## PHASE 5: BPEA ACCREDITATION

This is a negotiation between the school and BPEA.



## Contact us to find out more

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