

**ONE STUDENT AT A TIME IN  
A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS  
SMALL SCHOOLS BY DESIGN**



# BIG PICTURE LEARNING: WHY THIS, WHY NOW?

## ABSTRACT

From just one school in 2005, Big Picture learning has reached 44 schools across Australia, trained 1633 teachers and turned around the lives of almost 5000 students. For students who have given up on learning, Big Picture Education is an authentic and successful breakthrough strategy. Students pursue their passions and interests, are connected with the community through internships, are immersed in real, complex and engaging learning, are focused on their futures - and are succeeding. Research spanning three years explains how and why Big Picture ticks all the boxes for these and other strategies needed for success.<sup>1</sup> The research involved three universities, substantial case studies and a thorough examination of the evidence. With the help of students, teachers and parents we tell this story: our design for learning and for schooling and why, for so many of your young people, doing more of the same in our schools isn't an option. It is a crucial message for schools, systems and governments.

## SYNOPSIS

Young people are switching off and disengaging from schooling at unprecedented rates.<sup>2</sup> The response from Big Picture is personalised learning and real-world connections, committing to one student at a time in a community of learners, in schools that are small by design. The approach places the student, their passions and their interests at the centre of the learning process. Learning is organised around twelve connected school and classroom characteristics called 'distinguishers' (see Appendix).

This paper shows how these features and distinguishers contribute to the design of Big Picture learning, how this innovative design is being implemented in Australia, and how it impacts on the lives of young people. The paper draws on extensive recent research. Just as important, it draws on and tells about, the experiences of students, teachers and parents.

Big Picture is underpinned by the belief that authentic learning takes place when each student is an active participant in his or her education. Each student develops a personal learning plan with input from other students, the teacher/advisor, and parents. Students work two days a week in an interest-based internship, supported by a mentor from the community. They regularly exhibit the outcomes of their work to a public audience. Their progress is mapped against curriculum and accreditation requirements.

The Big Picture programs operating in Australia range from within-school academies to whole school programs, in some cases in greenfield sites. While it began in 2005, it is only in recent years that Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) has completed its research and gathered the evidence needed to more strongly advocate for the design. Big Picture schools are very much at the leading edge of successful innovation.

From the outset BPEA has wanted to inform and support the authentic school change needed to improve student engagement in learning and achievement. By reaching out to underachieving students, regardless of circumstance and location, BPEA has also wanted to achieve more inclusive and socially just outcomes for young people. BPEA is now able to contribute profound lessons – lessons applicable to all schools - from educators working at the edge and successfully putting ideas for change and innovation into practice.

## INTRODUCTION

The disconnection of students from learning represents a significant and intractable problem for individuals, families, schools, communities and governments. The extent of student disengagement is strongly illustrated by statistics about student retention, achievement, and qualifications. Margaret Vickers additionally points to a surprising decline in active participation in education, employment or training for 15-24 year olds.<sup>3</sup>

This decline in participation strongly suggests that schools have not developed in students a sustained interest and capacity to learn for life. Teachers certainly know about the students who ‘successfully’ drift through school, without really becoming engaged in learning and planning for their future. Teachers in Big Picture schools regularly find that, while some students were good attenders in their previous school, they didn’t do much work and stayed below the radar.

Most Australian schools have in place some programs aimed at increasing student engagement. They are commonly associated with the not-for-profit sector and a particular donor, representing a solution to particular problems, including in such areas as literacy and numeracy and school-to-work transition. But as the Global Education Leaders Project (GELP)<sup>4</sup> points out, such interventions take place within the existing model of schooling without affecting the core model of schooling - and therefore the nature of the learning experience.<sup>5</sup>

Valerie Hannon, a founding director of the high profile Innovation Unit,<sup>6</sup> also advocates a deeper intervention aimed at the bigger group of students who don’t become self-motivated and self-directed learners. She writes about a “widening disconnect between what interests, motivates and engages young people in their ‘real’ lives and their experience of schooling; and that this disconnect grows steadily during the secondary school years.”<sup>7</sup>

For these young people, who represent a range of ability levels, mainstream secondary schooling is not a hospitable place for learning. Not only do the students face myriad problems in their personal lives, the structure, pedagogy and curriculum in large high schools can be quite alienating. A GELP report states:

To transform schooling at scale, we need clear evidence about what works in learning combined with a radical, alternative vision of what’s possible. In short we need a set of rigorous and bold design principles on which transformation can be built.<sup>8</sup>

Sir Ken Robinson sees the future lying in forms of education that are customised to the needs and motivations of the people in them, where methods of

teaching arouse students’ appetites for learning – with all that this implies for the culture of schools.<sup>9</sup>

The message such observations convey is that if we want to connect young people to learning for the long term we can’t blame the students or just do a few different things at school – we need to do school itself differently, to redesign schools around proven successful practice or distinguishers? This is what Big Picture has done.

## THE BIG PICTURE DESIGN AND DISTINGUISHERS

Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) was founded in Australia by Viv White and John Hogan, drawing on their own experience in school change and improvement, and supported by a committed and experienced team of innovators. BPEA is a not-for-profit company which is supported by philanthropy and from payment for provided services, including for teacher learning and coaching.

Their focus on whole school change around twelve design distinguishers arose out of the deficiencies of previous sporadic and often piecemeal interventions – and drew on the success of Big Picture in the United States, especially through the work of Elliot Washor and Dennis Littky.<sup>10</sup> White and Hogan reshaped the distinguishers of Big Picture learning to further emphasise academic rigour, personalisation out of student interests and passions, getting students out in the community (learning in the real world) and getting the community and families into schools. They also developed an implementation process to reflect their own experience of successful school innovation. While they differ in some respects, Big Picture schools in several countries maintain close contact through Big Picture Learning International.

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 twelve distinguishers influence everything that Big Picture advisory teachers, leaders, students and families do – and this extends to the way the school is structured, managed and operated. The distinguishers are outlined in the Appendix, but in summary are:

1. Academic rigour: Head, heart and hand
2. Leaving to learn: Learning through internships
3. Personalisation: 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

The significance of these distinguishers, in combination, becomes evident to those who visit Big Picture schools. Students' personalised learning plans (PLPs) are about their goals and the people and processes needed to achieve these goals: advisors, internships, assessment, mentors and parents. In addition, their work is characterised by both academic rigour and collaboration and they work towards the same standards and qualifications considered to be important for all students.

Together, the distinguishers also reduce what have often been chronic problems, including poor discipline. Through personalisation students achieve substantial ownership and commitment. Through the internships they discover relevance. Through collaboration they develop relationships. As the evaluation of Big Picture shows, the subsequent reduction of school discipline problems is common to all Big Picture schools.

The evaluation also shows that implementation is less effective if the distinguishers are, in effect, cherry-picked. BPEA actively supports schools, but in the process insists that schools implement all the distinguishers. This isn't always easy: all schools are different and even a well-developed design will be implemented with some variations.

## HOW SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT BIG PICTURE

Big Picture schools are found across all states and in a range of communities; the design is clearly appropriate for students across a range of backgrounds and abilities. Implementation is a partnership between BPEA and the relevant school authority, with BPEA providing advice, support, teacher development and networking with other schools.

There are three ways in which interested schools have implemented the Big Picture design:

### 1. Whole school conversion to the design.

The best example is **Yule Brook College**,<sup>11</sup> a public school with a large Indigenous enrolment in Maddington (Western Australia). After trying a succession of intervention programs, this Year 8-10 high school joined BPEA in January 2007. Conversion to the design took several years and involved ongoing teacher development and substantial structural change. The considerable success of Yule Brook College is reported in the Big Picture evaluation.

### 2. Big Picture academy within a mainstream school.

The establishment of Big Picture programs within a mainstream school is the most common form of implementation and there are many examples:

- **Wanniassa School** is in Canberra where a group of self-selected Year 10 students attend Big Picture for the majority of their school time, while also attending other classes and programs where appropriate.
- **Birdwood High School**, east of Adelaide, operates Big Picture as one of two academies. The Big Picture academy has been very well received and has expanded significantly.
- **Brewarrina Central School** in New South Wales has introduced Big Picture as one of two initiatives which have dramatically changed the school culture and improved student achievement.
- **Silkwood** is a non-government school in Queensland in which all secondary students undertake Big Picture learning - currently in three advisories - and will continue Big Picture to Year 12.
- **Kingston High School** south of Hobart has one third of its Year 9 and 10 students in its Big Picture Academy, taking advantage of the school's design as a series of open planned pods.

### 3. Greenfield sites

These are Big Picture start-up schools, two examples being City Campus in Launceston and Cooks Hill Campus in Newcastle:

- **City Campus** began in 2011 when principals in Launceston wanted to establish a small-scale demonstration of a new learning environment. A formal partnership was established with BPEA and the Tasmanian Department of Education funded the school.
- **Cooks Hill Campus**<sup>12</sup> in Newcastle was established in 2014 by the NSW Department of Education and Communities in partnership with BPEA. It has 85 students in six advisory classes.

Along with other Big Picture schools, both City Campus and Cooks Hill have closely monitored and researched the implementation of the design. More information is contained within a number of documents produced as part of the evaluation of Big Picture.

## THE EVALUATION OF BIG PICTURE IN AUSTRALIA

The Big Picture design, both in Australia and overseas, has become more widely recognised, including by the UK-based Innovations Unit which showcased Big Picture learning in its collection of the 10 best schools and 10 big ideas for 21st Century education.<sup>13</sup> In its recent book, *Redesigning Education*, GELP outlines what it takes to transform education systems. The book cites Big Picture Learning as an example of this development. Charles Leadbeater and Annika Wong include Big

Picture schools as being among those which have pioneered more personalised approaches to learning.<sup>14</sup> In the United States President Obama identified Big Picture as an exemplar of the kind of education required for success in life, careers and family.<sup>15</sup> Referring to Big Picture Learning in the United States, Sir Ken Robinson states that their schools demonstrate the principles and methods on which the real solutions to the crisis in education should be based.<sup>16</sup>

However, it was clear to the Board of BPEA - and to funders - that the implementation of Big Picture learning in Australian schools needed to undergo a thorough evaluation. In 2011 the Origin Foundation funded a three-year evaluation which would seek information about the effectiveness of Big Picture, the extent to which any apparent success was linked to the design, and what improvements might be needed in the future.

It wasn't an easy task: the research needed to identify and describe the learning and achievement of young people, not only in terms of measurable outcomes such as test scores and attendance but also in the extent of their engagement and commitment to learning for the long term.

The outcomes of the evaluation are available in a series of reports readily available on the BPEA website.<sup>17</sup> Key findings are also included in a case study of Big Picture<sup>18</sup> compiled by Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP) in *Growing ideas through evidence*,<sup>19</sup> a publication in its Dialogue Series. The case study refers to impacts of Big Picture in a range of areas: student learning and engagement, social and emotional wellbeing, teacher quality, student capabilities, pathways and behaviour, attendance and retention, family and community engagement.

## 1. Ethnographic research

Big Picture partnered with two universities to undertake major ethnographic research in six schools in three states. This involved extended and repeat interviews with students, parents and teachers, work which yielded a substantial depth of information not possible using other methodologies. It was undertaken by Associate Professor Debra Hayes and Ms Deb Talbot at the University of Sydney, Professor Barry Down and Dr Kathryn Choules at Murdoch University.

The research identified phenomena describing the experiences of students, parents and teachers. It identified two groups of these experiences:

1. Those likely to maximise the education prospects of current and future generations of young people, particularly the vulnerable.
2. Those likely to contribute to creating employment readiness training and work

experience opportunities for the long term unemployed.

Adjunct Professors Margaret Vickers and Mo McCarthy at the University of Western Sydney reviewed the research and its findings. They noted comments from students which reflected their commitment to learning, attendance and participation, engagement, contribution to the community, academic improvement and supportive relationships with others:

It is clear that students experienced wide-ranging responses to the opportunities offered in Big Picture schools. Teachers and parents also were supportive of the Big Picture initiative. Representative student statements are indicative of outcomes achieved in the schools that participated in the Big Picture research project.<sup>20</sup>

They also highlighted the issues in Big Picture schools which demand attention, including the need for further support and teacher professional development, the need to expand the implementation of internships and to continue and improve school level research and collaborative learning. Like others, they stressed the need to develop appropriate indicators of student engagement and achievement.

As they conclude:

The research results: ... speak of a significant turn-around in the lives of these students. Where NAPLAN data are available, these indicate remarkable improvements in student achievement on core academic skills. Attendance data also improved very significantly, indicating higher levels of engagement with school. Above all, it is the students' own words, captured in the qualitative research, that provide the most compelling indication that Big Picture is working well for them.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Measuring progress

The evaluation team was keen to explore existing data held by schools and systems. The research undertaken by Department of Education in Tasmania gathered quantitative data in such areas as student achievement, school attendance and retention. The initial findings were encouraging but it was very difficult to aggregate the data, partly arising from Big Picture's very strengths; namely its ability to be implemented in a diversity of school settings:

In Tasmania, Big Picture schools are located in a range of communities with varying socioeconomic circumstances, with the Big Picture program catering for students from a variety of backgrounds. As a result, the effect of Big Picture in different settings may have different outcomes; this can lead to an 'averaging out' of observed outcomes when looking across all Big Picture schools.<sup>22</sup>

NAPLAN scores as a measure of student achievement weren't useful as the Year 9 NAPLAN tests are administered at the same time Big Picture programs begin. (The exception is Yule Brook College in Western Australia where students begin Big Picture in Year 8 – and their NAPLAN results have proven to be outstanding.)<sup>23</sup> As a consequence much of the quantitative data used for the Big Picture evaluation was school-sourced as well as derived from surveys conducted across significant numbers of schools. One of the evaluation documents, *Counting Success*,<sup>24</sup> gives substantial information about findings.

School-level data gathered since the evaluation continues to be very positive. The new **Cooks Hill Campus** has reported increasing student commitment to learning from its 90 students (2014) – and dramatic falls in the number of things that get in the way. Student attendance and suspension data, comparing their previous and new school experience, tells the story:

- On average, student attendance rates improved by seven per cent.
- A significant one-third of students improved their attendance on average by 27%.
- Individual attendance gains ranged up to 58%.
- 30% of the students had been suspended in their previous schools – this fell to 10% at Cook's Hill.
- The number of suspensions for the 90 students fell from 54 in 2013 (previous schools) to just 11 in 2014.

Student engagement at **Brewarrina Central School** (163 students) has increased, the quality of their work has risen and students have a future plan. Student achievement is now on a par with schools with more advantaged students and the number of suspensions in 2014 fell by 50%.

### 3. Telling the stories

Given the significance of affective domain outcomes it was also important for students, teachers and parents to relate their own Big Picture stories. These are contained in another evaluation document, *Stories out of School*.<sup>25</sup> They include observations from Rachel Grant, a student at Wanniasa High School and from Shelley Lavender a teacher at the same school. The document includes links to a large number of video clips of reflections from other students and teachers.

The stories have continued to gather since the evaluation was completed. In a recent conference a Big Picture parent recounted the depths to which her daughter had sunk in her personal and school life before she enrolled in a Big Picture school. As the parent relates, things soon changed:

[Name of student] has developed a sense of self and life goals. The mandatory weekly work placement made her think about what she wanted

to do with her career. Whilst the internship has given her a sense of direction it has also improved her skills. She's gained valuable skills from working within the hospitality industry ... such as independence, confidence, organisation, communication skills, and industry specific skills.

## ISSUES IN RESEARCHING INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

The search for indicators of student and school achievement showed the limitations of numerical data in evaluating a complex program administered in sometimes different ways in a diversity of sites with small numbers of students. As a measure of student progress, more useful information was obtained when student progress was assessed against previous achievement levels - but even this approach was problematic with so many students changing schools. Investigation of data and information collected by schools proved to more productive, especially data about student achievement 'before' and 'after' Big Picture.

What is clearly needed are system-wide efforts to identify and mine the greater variety of data and information that we value, collect and publish about student progress. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) notes that Australia lacks appropriate measures of engagement with learning - and in their absence we are reliant on measures of educational performance.<sup>26</sup> The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has also urged a better focus on what engagement at school really means.<sup>27</sup> There is always more scope for peak school and education professional groups to advocate for broadening the measures of student achievement with a focus on student engagement and commitment to learning.

Given the nature and purpose of Big Picture the qualitative research methodology employed in *Big Picture Education Australia: Experiences of students, parents/careers and teachers*<sup>28</sup> proved to be particularly valuable. It yielded a substantial depth of information about what the schools were and were not doing - and the extent to which the design itself explained the much reported student success. In evaluation it is certainly important to match what you are trying to find out to the most appropriate methodology.

## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The founders of Big Picture in Australia, Viv White and John Hogan, have between them amassed a wealth of experience and knowledge in school change. The recognition that Big Picture has received in recent years may have influenced the debate about school change, but it doesn't replace

the considerable effort and especially the partnerships needed to make it work. As Viv White attests:

... there are many willing to explore ways of developing new designs for schooling in partnership with BPEA; and we have worked successfully to connect these people to the philanthropic sector. This work extends to other government agencies such as ACARA, curriculum authorities and universities. In addition, we have found common ground with other not-for-profit companies such as the Stronger Smarter Institute and the Beacon Foundation. This three-way world is more complex, but well worth the pursuit. We now have formal relationships with systems of education, the first not-for-profit organisation redesigning and establishing public schools to achieve this.<sup>29</sup>

The current focus is to continue establishing demonstration sites in each state and territory and to make the improvements suggested by the evaluation. Demonstration sites are very important - visitors can see the design in action and learn from the experiences of students, teachers and parents. Frequent visitors include key people in schools, education departments, unions, philanthropy and government. They include brilliant and far-sighted educators, funders, bureaucrats at all levels and ministers. They know we must measure, value, celebrate and grow the things that make a real difference and be prepared to abandon things that don't.

There are many obstacles to expanding the design. One is the time it takes; shortcuts in planning, staffing, training and development don't work. For this reason Big Picture Education cautions against rapid expansion, favouring the current organic growth. BPEA itself is a small not-for-profit company and is not well-funded - but new schools need its support and networking. Existing support for schools provided by school authorities, while well intentioned, cannot currently sustain the design in participating schools.

## CONCLUSION: THE VIEW FROM THE EDGE

Those at the edge of innovation have an uncomfortable existence. By definition they are challenging existing orthodoxies, legacies, aspirations and even careers - in the process often creating discomfort for others. They also challenge the years and even decades of misdirected reform. Much of what passes as school reform represents distraction and avoidance of intractable problems.

The lessons learned by advocates of the Big Picture design also point to problems in the capacity of schools and systems to effectively scale or spread proven innovation. Professor Pat Thomson argues that the way we currently scale-up educational change, driven by 'beacon/ lighthouse schools' and 'evidence based practice', both produces and reproduces the inequitable distribution of educational benefits.<sup>30</sup> To an extent, Big Picture learning with its focus on socially just outcomes, challenges far more than reflects existing beliefs about the 'spreadability' of innovation. This is something that somehow, Big Picture, as well as other stakeholders in school change, have to deal with.

Some things are givens: engagement of our young people in learning - in school and beyond - is the key. Nothing much else will happen without this engagement, especially for those most at risk. Schools can and do push most students through the hoops. But we can't call it success if it comes to an end when young people walk away from school - which they do too early, too often, and at great personal and national cost.

Chris Bonnor and Viv White



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**Big Picture**  
EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

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# APPENDIX

## THE BIG PICTURE EDUCATION DISTINGUISHERS

The Big Picture Education design is a dynamic approach to learning that has been changing the lives of students, educators, and communities in Australia since 2006. The design is based on three foundational principles: firstly, that learning must be based on the interests and goals of each student; secondly, that a student's curriculum must be relevant to people and places that exist in the real world; and finally, that a student's abilities must be authentically measured by the quality of his or her work.

There are a number of design elements that, in combination, distinguish Big Picture Education from other designs of schooling. These elements or 'distinguishers' influence everything that advisory teachers, leaders, students and families try to do in a Big Picture school or program.

The distinguishers are:

### 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.

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The logo for Big Picture Education Australia features the words "Big Picture" in a large, bold, serif font. Above the word "Picture" is a stylized red arc that curves over the top of the letters. Below "Big Picture" is the text "EDUCATION AUSTRALIA" in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font.

EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

ONE STUDENT AT A TIME IN  
A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

SMALL SCHOOLS BY DESIGN