



Big Picture Education Australia

www.bigpicture.org.au

Innovation

Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) combines academic learning with real-world learning. All BPEA schools are designed around twelve common and interrelated characteristics called 'distinguishers', such as educating 'one student at a time'. The approach deliberately inverts traditional school education by placing the student, their passions and their interests at the centre of the learning process. Creating small schools within schools is a key design feature of the approach, with specific recommendations around the total number of students and teacher-to-student ratio, along with an emphasis on building quality relationships between students, teachers and parents. We believe that authentic learning takes place when each student is an active participant in their education, when their course of study is personalised by teachers, when parents and mentors know them well, and when school-based learning is blended with outside experiences that heighten the student's interest.

Each secondary school student develops a personal learning plan and project with input from an advisory group comprising other

Outcomes

The aim of BPEA is to stimulate vital changes in Australian education by generating and sustaining innovative, personalised schools that work in partnership with their broader communities. The focus on whole school change around the twelve design distinguishers arose out of what the research was indicating as the deficiencies of past interventions and



students, his/her teacher/advisor, and parents. In a BPEA school, students work two days a week in an interest-based internship, called the *Learning Through Internship* (LTI). The student works with a mentor from the community on their project. Four times a year, students exhibit the outcomes of their work to a public audience. Students learn through their interest projects, in internships and in regular lessons.

the relatively low impact of programs and school reforms on student engagement and achievement outcomes. Within BPEA schools, improvements in these and other outcome areas are sought.

BPEA has collected research and evaluation data from teacher, student and parent



interviews and surveys, school records, site visits and a peer reviewed research report by Deb Hayes, Barry Down, Deb Talbot and Kathryn Choules (2013) Big Picture Education Australia: experiences of students, parents/carers and teachers (Sydney: Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney).

Examples include

Improving	What might help you notice whether improvements are being made? Through... Evidence and approaches, such as
<p>Student learning and engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All BPEA students are required to complete Learning Plans each term and to exhibit what they have learnt four times a year. • Students report: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ (Re)discovering purpose in education (e.g. <i>"I was always studying ahead of the other kids in class so when I was repeating work it felt really boring, really difficult to stay interested in coming to school. So coming here gave me the opportunity to do things that are a bit beyond what I could have imagined, to be honest."</i> (I)) ▶ Feeling positive about their progress (e.g. <i>"My grades from spending a year at Big Picture shot up by a mile...it gives you a good feeling in your stomach, you're like I'm now doing well at school."</i> (A)) ▶ With enthusiasm and knowledge about the 'personal interest projects' they are doing (e.g. <i>"For my personal interest project I am writing a book on forensic science and how it all works. I have written a chapter on the history of it and now I am writing one on DNA profiling ... I'm doing a lot of English due to the writing, lots of science and biology, maths from the blood spatter analysis, which uses trigonometry. And the history of science too."</i> (A)) ▶ Improvements in their academic results (e.g. <i>"I've noticed a change in my literacy and grammar. Before I could hardly spell. Now I'm developing my vocabulary through all my writing and my projects."</i> (T)) • Parent anecdotal comments reflect their child has (re)discovered purpose in education (e.g. <i>"Just over time to see her, how she responded to the program, and her performance and just unlocking a desire for learning was amazing. I sincerely believe she wouldn't have got that in any other way."</i>) • Students are reconnecting to and completing their schooling (e.g. In BPEA Greenfield sites such as City Campus (TAS) and Cooks Hill Campus (NSW) are re-engaged with learning at their new school. At the end of 2013 over half of Year 12 at Launceston City Campus achieved their Tasmanian Certificate of Education and most of Year 11 were on track to do the same.)

continued





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Social and emotional wellbeing

Formal and informal evidence and approaches show:

- **Students and teachers valuing the opportunity to develop close and productive relationships** (e.g. From student surveys, teacher surveys and interviews, and anecdotal feedback, such as *"Teachers at mainstream schools have so many students walking through their doors every year, so you can't really build that relationship with a teacher. But while you're at (name of BP campus) you've got three years with one teacher! So you build an amazing relationship with that teacher ... so I reckon there definitely needs to be a teacher relationship or you just go downhill."* (T) and *"In the past, I'd have to rush through the curriculum. Now I think, what are these kids' strengths and how can I help them? Now it's more about depth than quantity."* (Advisory Teacher))
- **Parents also valuing the close and productive relationships between their child and advisory teacher** (e.g. From parent surveys and anecdotal feedback, such as *"His advisory teacher probably knows him better than I do! ... I think it's really beautiful because when he does not want to speak to me, he has the trust to speak to her. And as a parent, you can't do everything so to be able to have other people in their lives to help them grow and become the person they are going to be, it takes a big load off my shoulders."* (D's mum))
- **Students articulate their growth in confidence and public speaking skills** (e.g. From regularly exhibiting their work to peers, teachers and family and anecdotal feedback, such as *"I gained more social skills, like I got to be able to talk in front of people, in front of the camera, in front of a big crowd of people that I never thought I'd be able to do because I'm such a shy person but exhibitions have allowed me to become better."* (B))
- **Parents report their child is feeling safe, motivated and is learning** (e.g. From parent surveys and anecdotal feedback, such as *"Those 16 kids have just really bonded and they've become a family and she needs to feel secure ... so now she's happy and doing what she needs to do! At last!"* (E's Mum))

Teacher quality

- Teachers in BPEA schools receive substantial professional learning including a five day foundation course for those new to the concept, a two day workshop on how to implement an internship program and various project-based learning workshops. This is both an improvement process for BPEA and an opportunity to gather formal and informal data about the efficacy of the BPEA design. (e.g. Teachers expressing satisfaction with the training and anecdotal comments, such as *"... putting the child first with the goal of the child believing they really matter"; "... the chance to work collaboratively on solutions"; "I will implement some new strategies within my advisory, present new ideas to the team and try to push some whole school options along."*)

continued





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Student capabilities

(leadership, maturity, personal and social competence, communication skills)

- Learning approaches, such as the public exhibitions, directly seek to develop a range of student capabilities.
- Student anecdotal comments reflect they are developing a range of capabilities leading to, for example, improved understandings of themselves, performance and new social relationships (e.g. *"I stepped up and took leadership roles a lot and I wouldn't have taken leadership roles without the confidence from BP – I could never stand up in front of class before that – so I stepped up."* (T); *"I actually have friends now!"* (I); *"...you get all these social skills and you just learn to be an adult."* (B))

Future Pathways

- Big Picture schools provide a written report each year to BPEA that includes feedback on 'where are the students now'. This provides evidence of the:
 - ▶ Number of students entering university (e.g. some of our schools in WA and the Hunter Valley region of NSW have negotiated entry to local universities, such as Murdoch and Newcastle Universities via portfolio entrance).
 - ▶ Numbers of students achieving vocational education certificates (e.g. students are leaving school already with Certificates 2, 3 and 4 in areas of vocational interest and are thus well on the path to further training and employment).
 - ▶ Numbers of students finding employment (e.g. students find employment as a direct result of the experiences gained and skills demonstrated during an internship completed at a Big Picture school).
- Student anecdotal comments reflect a sense of achievement and feeling better prepared for post-school life (e.g. *"The first person in my family to go to university...one of the first Big Picture students to get to university...I feel honoured."* (A); *"I feel that I'll be more prepared for the workplace - for the world - from Big Picture than any other school could have provided for me."* (T); *"Big Picture was definitely an advantage because I was able to experience what the industry was like and obtain proficiencies ... to go further."* (I))

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Student behavior

- Most interactions with parents visiting school are positive (e.g. Only 14% of parent visits to BPEA schools were about student behavior problems).
- All BPEA schools report a fall in the number of student discipline problems, suspensions and bullying. This is believed to be due to a greater engagement and participation in learning, the 'culture of respect' that develops in a small school community where everyone is known, and to teachers having more time to emphasise positive relationships and well being.
- Teacher anecdotal comments reflect a positive attitude to parent engagement (e.g. *"We made it very clear we wanted families to be there ... In the beginning they think they're just there because you're going to say something bad about their kid, but now they know what it's about, they're more than happy to come in, now they give feedback and talk about exhibitions, it's great!"* (L, Advisory Teacher))
- Parent anecdotal comments reflect their child's behavior at school has improved (e.g. *"I have found that his level of maturity has gone up in levels because he is treated like an adult. He has so much respect for his teacher. It makes a massive difference."* (D's mum))

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Student attendance and retention

- All BPEA schools report improvements in attendance and retention (e.g. In 2011 and 2012, Grade 10 to 11 retention was between 82% and 92% at BPEA in Montrose Bay and Launceston (TAS); Halls Head Community School (WA) and Cooks Hill Campus (NSW) report that students' attendance is significantly improved compared to in their previous school or program.)
- Students in BPEA schools have better attendance rates than their mainstream peers (e.g. those in Erindale College (ACT), Scottsdale High and Montrose Bay High (TAS))
- Students are making reference to their improved attendance (e.g. *"I think I have had only one day off this term. I think last year I had two terms off, so this is a great improvement! I am happy to get out of bed in the morning and come work on things that I am interested in."* (A))

continued





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Family engagement

- Improved participation of parents in school activities (e.g. BPEA schools report that an average of 90% of students have at least one parent/ carer attending their exhibition. This figure increases to 99% in longer established BPEA schools).
- In a research document into the experiences of students, parents/ carers and teachers with BPEA, parents described a range of positive experiences associated with their child's enrolment in BPEA, including perceptions of transformations in their child's attitude to school, great enjoyment of school and more academic success.
- Anecdotal comments reflecting that parents are interested and actively engaged (e.g. *"My mum was a huge part of my education and she had a huge role in that she would come and sit at my exhibitions and I was able to show her exactly what I was doing at school and she was able to see and meet all the people that were behind and supporting me."* (G))

Community engagement

- Students undertake internships in the community in an area of interest. (This is an integral part of the BPEA design.)
- Students are connected to an adult mentor who shares their passion and can help them to engage more deeply with that interest over a long period of time, such as a school term.
- Mentors attend students' exhibitions at the end of the internship.
- Mentors are making positive anecdotal comments about their relationships with student 'interns' (e.g. *"[Student] approached us and said he'd love to coordinate, or what we call in the trade 'curate' an exhibition', and we said 'That's a great idea, we'd love to work with the high school sector'."; "There would have been about 50 people that have looked and used [student name] work on threatened species in the Tarkine so it's something that's absolutely valuable and real."*)





Lessons learned

Over the past ten years that BPEA has been working in school redesign, we find working across sectors particularly exciting. Our Board of Directors and founders have significant networks that they have developed over thirty years. We have found that there are many within systems of education 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-profits 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 redesigning and establishing public schools to achieve this. Along this journey, we have been developing the evidence base for school redesign. Through this we've learned:

Methodology matters: We partnered with three universities to undertake a deep ethnographic piece of research in six schools in three states. Funded by the Origin Foundation, this research included extended and repeat interviews with students, parents and teachers. This approach yielded a substantial depth of information about what BPEA Schools were doing; the 'unique' features of the BPEA model of schooling and the extent BPEA schools were supporting student success across a range of cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. The lesson here is to match what you are trying to find out to the most appropriate approach: don't just pick an approach - 'a Randomised Control Trial' - because others have used this approach or it appears to be 'flavour of the month'.

Data matters: In general, commonly reported data about Australian schools is deficient. At all levels (macro-meso-micro), data about attendance, behavior and retention, while concerning, tends to understate the extent of disengagement and underachievement among young people. We've learned, for example, that school-level research can show that while some students were good attenders in their previous school, they didn't do much work and stayed below the radar. Similarly, we've learned, for example, that using only average attendance figures as an indicator of improvement is limiting.

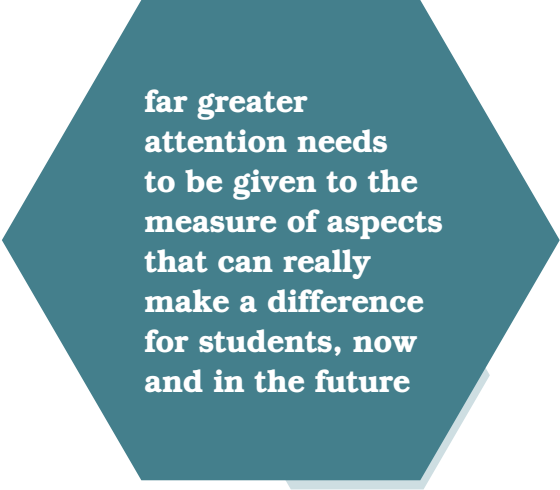




We've also found it difficult to compare retention data when students change schools. Even states with reasonable data have student tracking problems. We've found that school-by-school 'snapshots' of student retention have been more informative for the school and us, than trying to aggregate and average student retention across very diverse BPEA schools. These school-by-school reports show significant improvements in retention in school and then on to further education, but we're learning that such changes can take time. Our longest established greenfield BPEA school reports that a quarter of its school leavers are now going into tertiary education compared to 5% in their early years as a BPEA school.

In the outcome area of student achievement we've found that 'progress' is best assessed against a student's previous achievements, as there are few 'similar students' against which they can be compared.

Overall, since Big Picture Education Australia began, with regard to data matters, we've concluded that far greater attention needs to be given to the measure of aspects that can really make a difference for students, now and in the future: student engagement in learning, student wellbeing and sustained student achievement.



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