



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Organisation: Big Picture Education Australia
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: NSW

Summary

There is a student engagement crisis in our schools. We know enough about the problem. In the search for solutions the Review has been challenged to think outside the square. This is what Big Picture learning does with a design that links the school experience with opportunities for young people beyond the school gate.

We ask that:

Members of the Review panel visit Big Picture schools to witness what high levels of student engagement look like in schools and what this achieves for students.

The Review recommend a working party be established to investigate and report on:

- practical school designs and strategies to engage students in sustainable learning,
- how measurement and school accountability processes can include assessment of student engagement.

Recommendations on how schools should meet the needs of all students should emphasise the primary and proven role of authentic personalised learning.

To support the expansion of proven practice, a fund be established by the Commonwealth to support non-profit organisations that meet criteria agreed by the Review for establishing long term school improvement.

To improve and properly target school accountability, innovative schools such as Big Picture be consulted prior to the establishment of new processes.

Schools be further supported to develop partnerships with universities in ways that maintain standards while creating flexible pathways that will further help students plan their learning futures.

To further support emerging innovation, an ongoing facility/body be established to assess the relevance of new initiatives and the evidence for their success.

We remain very aware that embracing wider solutions to long term problems is a risky prospect. But in Big Picture we took a very big risk. We've existed on the edge and made a difference.

We are confident that the current Review can do the same.

Main submission

EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Educational success relies on the relevance, authenticity and effectiveness of the process of learning as well as, in broad terms, the content. Engagement of students – and of schools – is essential for this success. Engagement is enhanced when learning has strong links to student passions and interests, when learning becomes personalised and relevant for each student.

This is what lies at the heart of Big Picture programs operating in Australia – in both government and non-government schools. This submission is based on our experience of the success of the Big Picture learning design. More and specific information about Big Picture in Australia is available from the Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) website [www.bigpicture.org.au] and from:

- research into its efficacy and effectiveness, most recently by the Department of Education in NSW, [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/cooks-hill-campus-implementation-big-picture-design-and-philosophy>] an earlier substantial evaluation [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/transforming-learning-and-schools>] and as part of a joint project with Murdoch University. [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/big-picture-academy-bpa-project-map4u-murdoch-university>]
- media reports, including Lateline (ABC) [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/news/big-picture-education-lateline>], Sydney Morning Herald, [<http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/schools-and-universities-welcome-alternative-to-hsc-exams-20170626-gwyvtg.html>] reports produced by [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/big-picture-academy-bpa-project-map4u-murdoch-university>] or made available [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/what-research-telling-us-conference-presentation-professor-barry-down>] by BPEA – and most significantly, stories from students. [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/big-picture-academy-bpa-project-map4u-murdoch-university>]

WHAT SHOULD STUDENTS LEARN?

As revealed by significant research

[<http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/reports/educational-opportunity-in-australia-2015-who-succeeds-and-who-misses-out/>], there is a serious disconnect between young people and their schools. Reconnecting students is our priority; in the absence

of authentic student engagement in their learning few other outcomes can be realised and sustained through school and through life.

Big Picture is committed to one student at a time in a community of learners. For Big Picture schools, essential capabilities, skills and knowledge are reflected in the twelve distinguishers [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/schools/big-picture-school-distinguishers-0>] of the design. These bring together essentials such as future focus, academic rigour, real world learning, collaboration and participation. Hence, in response to this question we demonstrate aspects of how students acquire essential capabilities, skills and knowledge – rather than creating long lists of specific outcomes.

In Big Picture schools learning is highly personalised and based on students' passions. Relevance is critical and achieved in the links between school and internship providers. Big Picture students spend up to two days each week in an interest-based and curriculum-linked internship with a mentor from the community. Together with personalised learning, this is what distinguishes Big Picture from all other innovations.

The internships help students develop knowledge and skills that they would not acquire at school. As the evaluation of Cook's Hill Campus [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/cooks-hill-campus-implementation-big-picture-design-and-philosophy>] in Newcastle indicates, the internships promote learning about both industry-specific workplaces and about more general workplace knowledge and skills. Parents, as well as students, report very positively on the benefits.

MEASUREMENT OF SUCCESS

In most schools success is determined by an assessment of achievement in predetermined subjects. There is no measure for students who develop a passion for learning – and set themselves up for life - through their accomplishment in diverse pursuits and places.

Big Picture students participate in existing state and national assessment programs, but in addition they are rigorously assessed through presentations (student exhibitions) of what they have learned. Students give an oral presentation on their personal Learning Plan (LP) and Learning Through Internship (LTI) work. The audience may consist of the advisory teacher, parents, peers, mentors and other teachers.

The researched and proven outcomes [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/transforming-learning-and-schools>] of the Big Picture learning design in Australian schools point to what we value in student achievement and related measurement. We know that:

- Big Picture students achieve at higher rates than they did in their previous schools
- their attendance rates are high and usually well above their previous rates
- their retention to later years of schooling and then to tertiary/employment is high
- schools constantly report that discipline problems and suspension rates are low
- most students leave school with appropriate qualifications
- as indicated above, parent participation rates are very high (over 90%)
- students and parents have very favourable perceptions of the schools

These achievements illustrate the diversity of what we regard as desirable school outcomes – and suggest how schools might be able to broaden the ways in which they measure quality and success.

In assessing the performance of schools, test scores point to individual student results against a set standard at given times. But students might be equally successfully doing different things at the same time. This means that like the learning, measurement of success needs to be personalized, reflecting the reality that students learn and progress in diverse ways and stages.

As a part consequence, comparisons generated by standardised assessment risk discounting the very real achievements made by innovative schools. What is the relative worth of desired NAPLAN grades against post-school take up rates of employment and further education? Both are important, but measuring one - and not the other – devalues the relative worth and achievement of school designs that are successfully different. There is clearly a need for a far greater balance in the measures of student success. Without this, BPEA is concerned that innovative schools will forever be regarded as outriders – limiting the extent of their reach to students who are sometimes poorly served by mainstream schooling.

We strongly recommend that members of the Review panel visit Big Picture schools to witness what high levels of student engagement, including by previously disengaged students, look like in schools. These schools might include, but not be limited to:

- Yule Brook College, Halls Head College near Perth
- Cooks Hill Campus, Hunter Sports and Morisset High Schools in Newcastle
- Launceston Big Picture School
- Fitzroy Valley District High School, Ngaanyatjarra Lands School (remote WA)

We further ask that the Review recommend that a working party be established to investigate and report on:

- practical school designs and strategies to engage students in sustainable learning,
- how school accountability measures can be expanded to include measures of student engagement.

HOW TO IMPROVE

Unlike some school reforms the Big Picture design is not a quick fix 'bolt-on' program. Conversion to the design delivers benefits quite early - but complete implementation can take years, depending on whether it is a whole school conversion, a within-school academy or a greenfield site. By any measure it is hard work.

BEST USE OF FUNDING

The efficiency of how funding is used is very important. The experience of Big Picture is that, after an initial investment (mainly in teacher learning and development), the cost of Big Picture schools is similar to that of mainstream schools. Some costs, such as school administration, are lower – other costs, including having a class (advisory group) size of seventeen students, are higher. The effectiveness of the investment in Big Picture schools is well illustrated by the outcomes illustrated previously, especially for previously disengaged students.

How does this play out for different groups of students? In the Big Picture design each student's learning plan takes into account their interests, stage of development and goals. The needs of individual students are addressed regardless of any cohort with which they might be identified. Considerable effort is spent in exploring the passions and interests of even the most disengaged students, regardless of their level of ability. Personal Interest Programs (PLPs) cater equally well for academically advanced students.

There is far less need to overtly identify particular students and cohorts. This means that the progression of students is not accompanied by labels and the assumptions that these often evoke. All students in advisory groups are equally supported by the teacher/advisor and have access to additional support as required. As a learning design this approach is far more inclusive, available and cost effective than the common approach of providing separate programs, classes or schools for identified cohorts.

We recommend that the Review's recommendations on how schools should meet the needs of all students emphasise the primary and proven role of personalised learning.

IMPROVING PRACTICE - WHAT WORKS?

This question is best answered by explaining the teaching/learning process in Big Picture schools. Each teacher/advisor takes the same group of students from year 9 to year 12. Each student develops a personal learning plan (PLP), with input from other students, the teacher/advisor, and parents. Student learning plans are cross-curriculum.

The bulk of each student's work at school is driven by their plan, as is their interest-based internship.

Students regularly exhibit the outcomes of their work to a public audience. Their progress is mapped against curriculum and accreditation requirements. Most students also complete some curriculum requirements in conventional classrooms. They participate (and do well) in system-wide assessment of achievement, but their school experience is not driven by it.

The design implements twelve connected school and classroom characteristics called 'distinguishers' [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/schools/big-picture-school-distinguishers-0>]. Each will be familiar to educators and they strongly reflect the themes identified in the Review's Issues Paper. None of those themes should be regarded as dispensable. In the same way, it is the combination of the Big Picture distinguishers which explain the success of the design. Success is more limited if schools don't implement all the distinguishers.

As indicated at various places in this submission, the evidence for the success of the Big Picture design is substantial. It has been gathered in three major evaluations and has been explained in the context of other questions in this submission.

WHAT WORKS BEST FOR WHOM?

The strength of the design is that it holds up well in a diversity of contexts, hence our simple response to the question is to illustrate this diversity. Our schools bring the design to students with a wide range of backgrounds, prior schooling and abilities. The learning design is equally able to serve:

- the students in the Big Picture Academy at the Independent Silkwood School in S-E Queensland?
- the 95% of Indigenous students at Fitzroy Valley District High School in WA

- the diverse range of students at Hunter Sports High School in Newcastle?
- the 150 students in the fully Big Picture school in Launceston?
- the special interests of students at Morisset High School?
- the high achievers entering university from Hunter Sports High School and shortly from Cook's Hill Campus?

Ultimately the answer to what works best for whom needs to come from the students themselves. BPEA has substantial accounts [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/news-archive>] of what students say about what works best for them.

HOW TO SUSTAIN AND GROW GOOD PRACTICE

From the outset BPEA has set out to inform and support the authentic school change needed to improve student engagement and achievement. Big Picture schools are very much at the leading edge of successful innovation - but the Big Picture design is aimed at enhancing, rather than replacing, our provision of schooling. With our growing number of consultants, trainers and coaches, we are now able to contribute profound lessons from educators working at the edge and successfully putting ideas for change and innovation into practice.

A key requirement for the growth of school reform is the availability of practical examples of where and how it works. BPEA is currently working to provide demonstration schools in each State. Its success to date in doing this, and in disseminating news about the design, helps explain why it has now reached 40 schools.

However, BPEA is a small non-profit organisation that struggles from year to year with less than \$250K in the bank and an annual budget of just \$750 000. Its initial growth was supported by the philanthropic sector but it now relies more on selling its services to schools. While this adequately supports existing schools it doesn't support expansion. Nor has the take-up of the design yet reached the stage where school authorities can independently provide the much-needed specialist support for schools.

For a variety of reasons, government programs and philanthropic sector initiatives prefer to directly support schools, in some cases with programs that display the funding source. Such funding is not usually available to supporting organisations such as BPEA.

Accordingly, BPEA asks the Review recommend that a fund be established by the Commonwealth to support non-profit organisations that meet criteria agreed by the Review for establishing long term school improvement.

With additional support we will be able to:

- expand the help available to schools implementing Big Picture
- better respond to the schools wanting to explore Big Picture
- better capture and manage data to accurately depict what works and why
- consolidate benchmark standards for portfolio-based entrance to university
- establish widely accepted accreditation for the learning program
- better share aspects of the learning program that are rapidly growing in popularity across mainstream schooling, such as project based learning, internships and the use of authentic assessment that requires students to demonstrate what they have learned

ROLE OF ENABLERS

In some circumstances and in some hands, what might be regarded as system enablers have become disablers. They inevitably proceed on assumptions about how schools are organised, what they should do and how they should be accountable. Even when they try to avoid doing this, they still might have the effect of distorting school priorities (as evidenced by NAPLAN) or unintentionally constraining school-level innovation.

A common response in recent times has been to devolve authority to schools, especially in public systems. Big Picture has been successful in systems that still remain quite centralised. However, it is also the case that greater flexibility in matters such as resourcing, especially staffing, is needed to support this quite radical school design.

Two examples of the tension between enabler requirements and school-level innovation are instructive.

The first involves the poor alignment between innovative/deep school-reform and the need for students to achieve desired external certification, such as the HSC. The positive outcomes of rigorous personalised learning are substantial, but having students also having to completing set courses for other certification (e.g. HSC) is a substantial additional ask - and at a big cost for schools.

Big Picture schools are resolving this problem in a variety of ways. Students undertake their personalised research (and related internships) and also complete HSC subjects relevant to their needs - at their school or with other providers. Their diverse pathways include:

- work and related training opportunities, including at TAFE and vocational colleges – or further HSC subjects.

- university studies, after being chosen by portfolio entry under arrangements brokered between BPEA and eight Australian universities.

They may not, in their final school year, meet requirements for the award of an HSC, but as illustrated in response to the next question, this may not matter.

The second example refers to the monitoring reporting and application of our investment in schools. The quality and operation of school reviews around Australia varies considerably, yet they are important to provide assurance about school progress and achievement.

But we need to avoid any tendency for school reviews to become a cookie-cutter compliance process. Big Picture has developed and is currently reviewing a School Review Framework based on the design distinguishers and learning goals. Whatever school review system is preferred, panels need to include, for innovative schools, a student, parent, teacher and a representative of any supporting organisation/s. A good review process needs flexibility, including in the manner of reporting. They need to develop and improve schools and disseminate good practice.

We ask that innovative schools such as Big Picture are consulted prior to the establishment of new accountability processes.

TESTING AND DEVELOPING EMERGING IDEAS

Education in, and exit from, Australian schools has long been influenced by the needs of tertiary institutions - something that works well for many, but not all students.

The learning of Big Picture students is built around well-documented and supported rigorous research – culminating in a Graduation Portfolio [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/news/big-picture-education-%E2%80%98graduation-portfolio%E2%80%99-%E2%80%93-engaging-pathways-all-young-australians>]. To create further opportunities for these students BPEA has negotiated with thirteen universities a new portfolio-based national entry process to university. Whilst flexible it is systematic and standards (Australian Core Skills Framework) driven. Five students have already enrolled via this pathway – and the opportunity is widening the future plans of those still at school.

The reason this initiative is mentioned is that it demonstrates how the potential for large gains in student achievement partly lies not only within schools but in increasing access to post-school destinations. Just as Big Picture internships open many doors for our students; the Graduation Portfolio and this new pathway to university is opening even more.

Many schools have partnerships with universities and portfolio entry isn't new. BPEA believes that schools should be further supported to develop these partnerships in ways that maintain standards - while creating flexible pathways that will further help students plan their learning futures.

Assessing emerging ideas cannot be a one-off action; there needs to be some ongoing facility/body to address the ongoing need to assess the relevance of new initiatives and the evidence for their success.

BARRIERS TO IMPROVEMENT

There is no shortage of analysis and commentary on how schools can best embrace authentic reform – and what gets in the way. Some of the issues involved [<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/transforming-learning-and-schools>] were considered in the major 2011-14 evaluation of Big Picture learning in Australia.

The barriers to implementing such a substantial redesign of school learning, even in a small number of schools, are substantial – but so are the benefits. Almost by definition, deep reform challenges existing orthodoxies, legacies, aspirations and even careers. They also challenge the years and even decades of misdirected reform.

However, the success of Big Picture shows that, with the support of far-sighted philanthropy, educators can successfully work with key political leaders and education system managers to create the necessary change. BPEA now succeeds because the design is readily visible in an increasing number of schools, many of which are demonstration sites.

While future expansion relies on an increased number of these sites, this heavily relies on the capacity of what is a small non-profit organisation (BPEA), combined with the energy, creativity and risk-taking of key movers and shakers. Expansion won't take place unless their efforts, achievements and resourcing receive much greater recognition and support. We believe that there is scope for the current Review to do this.