

# A DESIGN FOR REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA



  
**Big Picture**  
EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

ONE STUDENT AT A TIME IN  
A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

**SMALL SCHOOLS BY DESIGN**

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# WHAT IS THE BIG PICTURE DESIGN FOR SCHOOLS?



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



Big Picture Education<sup>1</sup> (BPE) 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 folk are not completing school and many more are not engaged in school learning. More still are not achieving their potential.

We do not own schools or manage them. We work with educators, philanthropists and government systems, to adapt the innovative Big Picture design to fit specific schools and communities. In Australia there are three Big Picture schools, two schools converting, and over thirty more exploring the design in programs within the school or applying aspects of the design across the school.

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

- Learning must be based on each student's interests and needs.
- Curriculum must be relevant to the students and allow them to do real work outside of school.
- Students' development and abilities must be measured by the quality of their work and how it changes them.

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

Students are in small groups (called advisories) of only 15–17, with a teacher (called an advisory teacher) who guides the same group all through high school. Each student also has an adult mentor outside of school. The 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 an off-campus internship generated from each student's interest. This real-life training could be in a law office, an arts studio, a research lab, a bank, a hospital, a national park...it could be anywhere. BPE students also tackle further education, including various certificates and university courses. Every term they exhibit their work to their advisory teachers, peers, parents, mentors and others in the community. Students help each other to reinforce their passions for real work outside of school. The result is a self-teaching community of learners where no one feels left out.

This is the 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 it involves the community. Over time it transforms community.

<sup>1</sup> Refer to [www.bigpicture.org.au](http://www.bigpicture.org.au) for more information about Big Picture Education Australia, the Big Picture design for schools, where current Big Picture schools are located, and many examples of what goes on in BPE schools.

<sup>2</sup> See also page 10: The Twelve BPE Distinguishers

# HOW DOES THE BPE DESIGN FOR SCHOOLS OFFER HOPE FOR EACH AND EVERY YOUNG PERSON?

## It is personal

The student is the focus of everything and everyone. Every adult – no matter what their role – helps the students to identify their interests, and develop their academic and social capacities.

## It is relational

The student develops strong relationships with their advisory teacher, other students in the room, their mentor(s) in the community and their family. Their learning is at the centre of all these relationships. These relationships are nurtured over the entire experience of school.

## The family is involved

Four times a year, every year, the family participates in individual learning plan meetings with their child and the advisory teacher. Four times a year, every year, they attend his or her exhibitions and participate in the discussions about progress and achievement. The family learns too. Through this involvement it is a small step to engaging family in other school activities such as social events, 'working bees', school meetings, or even enrolment in learning opportunities they want for themselves.

## The community is engaged

In addition to family, the student is mentored by people who live and work in the community. The Big Picture design incorporates the notion, 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

## CASE STUDY\*

# DEVELOPING OUR FUTURE LEADERS

In one Indigenous community we were told the story of a 16 year old young woman who was involved in the local land council. She is seen as its future leader. In her current schooling situation she is in a range of classes with different teachers, struggling, along with others, to connect her life experience with curriculum requirements.

If she were a Big Picture student she would be preparing herself for her leadership role. She could be doing courses in local government, governance and management of boards, and small business. She could be learning how to prepare papers, chair meetings, lead groups, and work in cross cultural environments.

At the start of each term she would meet with the advisory teacher, her family and elders

to discuss her learning plan and program of activities.

Each week she could be doing an internship at the land council, already working alongside the current chairperson and other elders, in preparation for her future work. She could even set up a school leadership group to develop the capacity of her peers for future community work. The local community leaders could be by her side in the school as she did this work.

All this would be part of her curriculum. She would be assessed at her exhibitions and at graduation.

Her family and mentors would attend her exhibitions and see her portfolio. They would participate in assessing her progress.

## *In a community of learners*

\* We have two sorts of examples in this paper. Some are real, from students' experiences in the BPE design in urban and regional centres and some are 'possibilities' where we don't yet have examples from remote settings. These examples have been created from visits to places and are based on likely scenarios.



*The BPE design for schooling offers students the opportunity to pursue their passions and interests all the way through.*

#### CASE STUDY

## FROM DROPPING OUT TO FLOURISHING ARTISTS

Two young Indigenous girls, Nina and Chloe (not their real names) are interested in their culture and art. Both were disengaged from school and had poor attendance rates. When they entered a Big Picture program, the year team leader investigated internships to enable them to explore their art and expand their natural talent. To help the girls develop their passions, a mentor with Indigenous art knowledge was found. As a consequence, the girls' attendance improved dramatically and they were extremely proud of their achievements. The local newspaper

ran a feature story on Nina and Chloe's artwork and the impact it was having on interstate and international visitors to the school. The Principal from a prominent Canberra high school was so taken with the art he commissioned the girls to paint a large canvas depicting his school and Yule Brook College (a Big Picture school in Western Australia) as sister schools. The Principal paid the girls a considerable amount for their artwork which has pride of place in the foyer of the Big Picture sister school in Canberra. The girls are now studying art at Central Institute of Technology.

# ARE THERE SUFFICIENT RESOURCES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BIG PICTURE EDUCATION DESIGN?

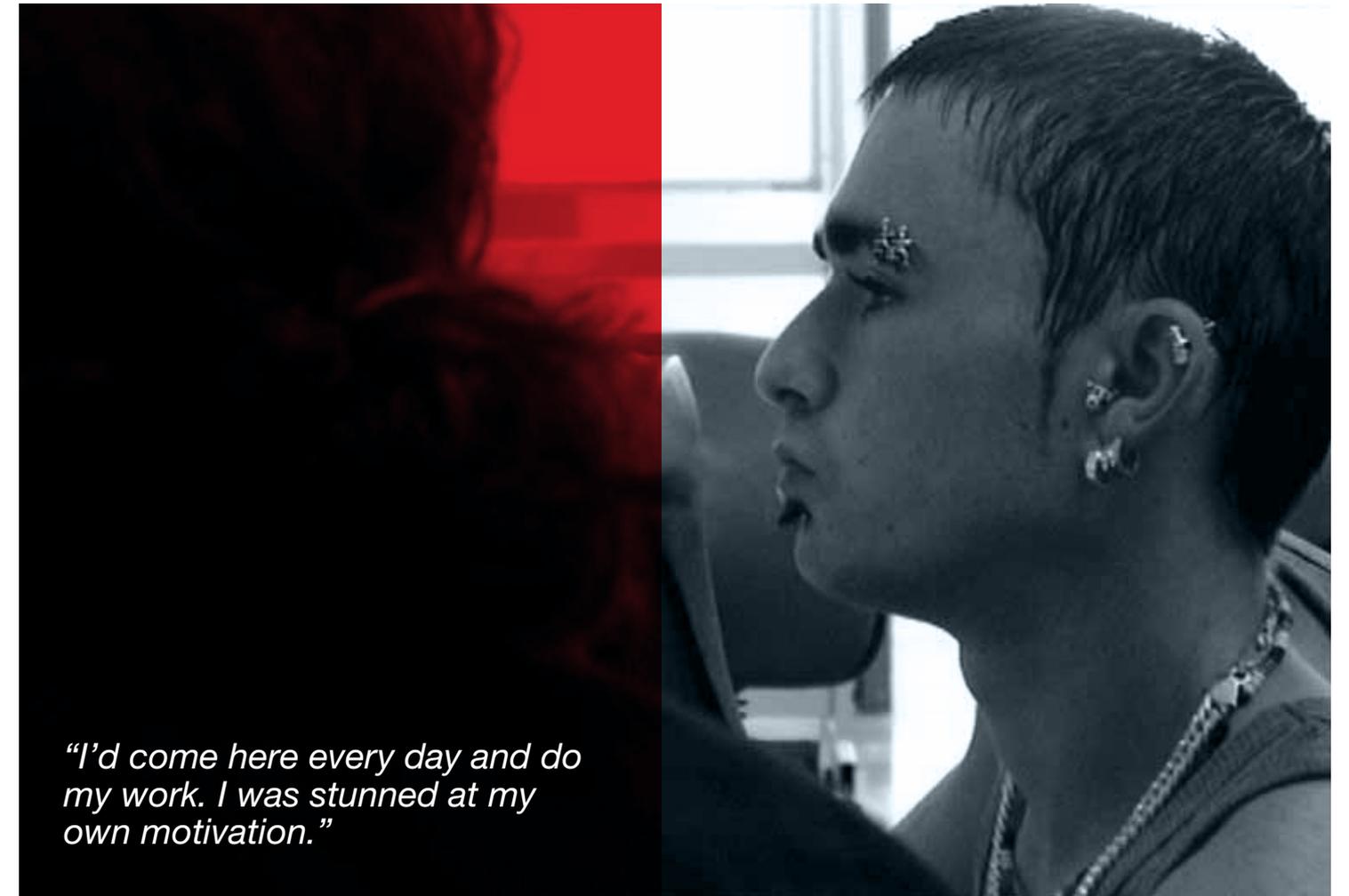
We believe so. The table below lists the numerous possibilities for internships.

A REGIONAL TOWN MAY INCLUDE:	A REMOTE COMMUNITY MAY INCLUDE:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A mine: the office, the researchers, the miners, the rehabilitators, OHS staff, the managers, the local support staff</li> <li>• A national park</li> <li>• The tourist industry</li> <li>• Mechanics</li> <li>• Bakery</li> <li>• Research scientists</li> <li>• Indigenous artists</li> <li>• Land council</li> <li>• Local council</li> <li>• Primary school</li> <li>• Musicians</li> <li>• Lawyers</li> <li>• Doctors</li> <li>• Health professionals</li> <li>• Musicians</li> <li>• Sporting clubs</li> <li>• Police</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The council and other leadership roles</li> <li>• Artists</li> <li>• Health services</li> <li>• Primary school</li> <li>• Social services</li> <li>• Mechanical services</li> <li>• Law and justice</li> <li>• Education and child care</li> <li>• Tourism or some other aspect of self sufficiency</li> <li>• Musicians</li> <li>• Sporting clubs</li> <li>• Aged Care</li> <li>• The requirements of any community and local council that include:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rubbish collection and dispersal</li> <li>• Sport and recreational needs</li> <li>• Sustainability issues</li> <li>• Landscaping and development</li> <li>• Building development.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

There are opportunities for travel both near and far. Sometimes an internship can be set up as a long-term intensive such as completing a sailing venture.

Communication technology such as email and skype can be used for mentor support around interests. For example, some students in Launceston are currently being mentored by some film-makers in Sydney.





*"I'd come here every day and do my work. I was stunned at my own motivation."*

#### CASE STUDY

## 'THINGS STARTED TO BLOSSOM OUT'

School wasn't going well for Shannon Jukes, a young Indigenous man from central Victoria.

*"I played up. I was going nowhere,"* says Shannon, *"I had no teachers to help."*

He joined a start-up class of Big Picture students in a small room at the end of a dusty road. But it was a change-of-life sort of class: *"I came down here and they base everything on what I want to do: On my passion."*

It took a while for the effect to become clear. *"I'd come here every day and do my work. I was stunned at my own motivation. I'm actually doing my work here."*

*What's going on here?"* he asked.

He got to paint a mural at his old primary school not far away. Then *"things started to blossom out,"* says Jukes. *"I'm doing a diploma in graphic design now... I was just a dropout."*

As time went on he started talking... to little kids at first, then teachers, then doctors, then CEOs. Now, he's teaching too – computer studies and Indigenous education.

Two years later and he's nearing the completion of the diploma. He is designing. He does film and television. He's in demand. He's changed. Try telling him it wasn't Big Picture.



*The BPE design for school offers local communities the potential to educate their young people in more personalised and relevant ways.*

## HOW WOULD THE BPE DESIGN HELP?

Ladwig and Sara<sup>3</sup>, while reporting on the Northern Territory education system, identified five positions that are applicable to that system. Because schools exhibit similar patterns and behaviour to the system as a whole<sup>4</sup>, these five positions can be applied at the school level. The Big Picture Education design for schools addresses all five of these positions.

### **1. Building a more coherent system:**

Big Picture design principles provide ‘the what, the how, the why’ for the school. This helps the community stay focused, continually improving and developing.

### **2. Building a performance based system:**

In the Big Picture Education design, student work and achievements are public. Family, other students, teachers, and community members observe students exhibiting their work and learning every term, year in and year out. Student achievement is based on the development of quality products, with a robust accountability as an outcome. If a school embarks on a program using the Big Picture Education design, it will also become a focus for outside attention. Others will visit the school to see the learning at work. This builds accountability. The school is connected to an international network of BPE schools. Reporting to others also builds accountability.

<sup>3</sup> Ladwig, J, & Sarra, C (2009) Structural Review of the NT Department of Education and Training Delivering the Goods, NT DET.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Gantt, S.P. & Agazarian, Y.M. (Eds.) (2005). Systems Centered Theory in action: Applying the systems-centered approach in organizations. New York: Universe. Reprint (2006). London: Karnac Books.

### 3. Strengthening organisational capacity through improved recruitment and retention of staff:

We believe that a design with a focus on student engagement, engages the teachers too. This engagement will, over time, build staff retention. We believe that assigning a teacher to a Year 8 Advisory and asking them to lead the group through to the end of Year 12 offers the challenge of the teacher wanting to 'see it through,' to go all the way with their students from start to graduation (one student at a time, one teacher at a time) .

### 4. Increased participation of Indigenous personnel:

At all levels and all stages of this work Indigenous people are involved in their children's education: from family involvement in learning plan meetings to exhibitions of student learning; from teacher assistant involvement in training to working with teachers and students; from community participation as mentors for students to programs developed inside and outside the school. This involvement will overshadow the coming and going of teachers. The community will begin to induct the teachers. We also think that this approach will enhance the probability of teacher training for teacher assistants.

### 5. Strengthening school governance with improved community participation:

BPE has informed decision making through involvement in the learning process. Each and every term the family is invited into the school for a conversation with the advisory teacher and the student about their learning plan. Towards the end of every term the family is invited back to participate in their child's exhibition of their learning. A key aspect of every student's learning plan and program is to participate in an internship around their interest with a mentor in the community. The mentor is an expert in that interest and works with the student on a project of significance. The advisory teachers visit students and mentors to discuss progress and monitor on-site progress. In a BPE school, both family and the wider community are inextricably linked to the student learning. The products of such intense involvement are a much stronger set of school and community partnerships, a more robust and representative participation in school decision-making by the community and, over time, the development of new community activity in the school including adult learning opportunities.

**But more than these things, we believe that the BPE design can:**

- Build sustainability through the community learning how to engage in the work. This goes beyond the current teachers. New teachers get inducted by students and families.
- Build sustainability through success. Older students will mentor young students. People will not want to regress.
- Renew the community through its involvement in student learning. Everyone becomes a learner.
- Support the development of future community leaders and have everyone a participant in building community and enterprise.



*BPE design supports the development of future community leaders*



Community  
and school  
together

# THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) recognises that developing Indigenous communities will require a sustained commitment from all levels of government to work together and with Indigenous people, with major effort directed to seven action areas or 'building blocks'.

- Early childhood
- Schooling
- Health
- Economic participation
- Healthy homes
- Safe communities
- Governance and leadership

We understand that in some local area networks an eighth building block has been added:

- Culture and language

There is also an appreciation through the COAG literature that these building blocks are not separate and distinct. They are intensely interrelated.

The Big Picture design presents an opportunity for the school, as the key community resource, to have an impact on each and every one of these building blocks, both in the short term, and well into the future. The Big Picture design for school links all of these building blocks, reducing the need for each to require its own set of distinctive projects. However, if such projects do exist, then the Big Picture design can link them and improve their significance.

## ONE WAY TO BUILD CONNECTION

A community that has a high number of young (age 13 to 25) mothers might require a new approach to early childhood. A new health clinic, childcare facility and kindergarten might be planned to dove-tail with a new community centre. In the Big Picture design for school the young mothers can continue school through to graduation using the new centre as the focus for their schoolwork. For some, their learning interest will be their children. By working in an advisory, created at the community centre, they can focus on their children's development, conducting learning projects around the study of their child's growth and development. Other young women can use this environment and place to re-connect with their other interests. For some, these interests may be at school. Connecting these things in a comprehensive way through schooling also connects the building blocks listed beforehand.

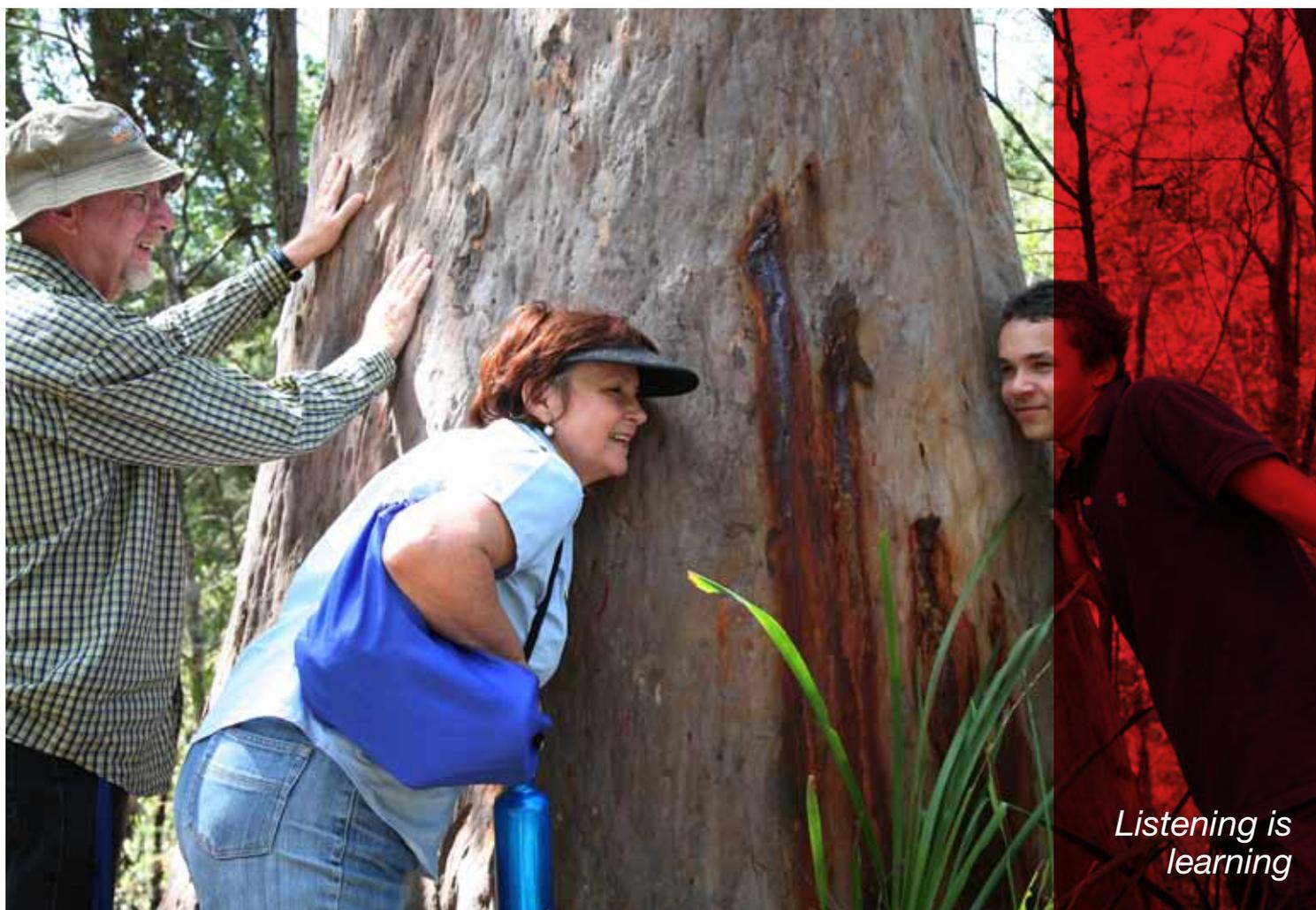
# BUILDING A HEALTHY FUTURE

Big Picture Education Australia seeks to assist students with a history of underachievement and disengagement at school. The following table summarises the situation facing several students and the changes emerging after going to a Big Picture school.

The student studies strongly indicate reduced levels of depression, anger, violence, drug and alcohol abuse and self-harm. They point to improved interrelated social and personal learning outcomes (eg. efficacy, courage, compassion, personal and civic improvement, connection and hope) that contribute to the health and wellbeing of young people.

Students	Prior school experience/ personal context	Evident changes: Big Picture school	Possible future
Keon*	Low achievement and risk-taking/antisocial behaviour (with peers)	Responded well in school and in internship, new peer relationships, leadership roles	Offered apprenticeship but will complete Year 12
Haydon*	Many absences and low achievement, depression, drug use, youth justice issues	Improved attendance, grades, and success with youth justice matters.	Early development of interests and plans
Kiara*	Serious and diagnosed combination of problems, attempted suicide	Considerable improvement in participation, personal wellbeing and success	Completing other courses and well-focused

\* Names of students have been changed





*We start  
with a  
conversation*

## HOW COULD YOU START?

There are many ways to get started and then many paths that can be followed. Here are some possibilities. Start where there is interest and then follow it everywhere

### **CONVERSATION**

Start by getting people engaged in conversation.

Talk with families

Talk with community eg local council, corporation, land council, local business, other service providers etc.

Talk with teachers eg about learning, and about the BPE design.

### **TAKING ACTION**

Organise visits to Big Picture schools and academies

Host introductory workshops on the BPE design.

Do something. Try exhibitions. Try a project. Try an internship. Try some activities to identify student interest. Try advisory time. Build action research around this work.

Start with enthusiastic staff and build from there.

### **PLANNING**

Start by understanding that this is no quick fix.

Start by acknowledging a map for development and that different things will be at different stages along the way:

- Exploring and experimenting
- Rethinking and redesigning
- Implementing
- Adjusting and developing
- Integrating and embedding

Seek connection and alignment between this activity and other network building, community engagement and current programs and projects.

Understand from the beginning that this is a long haul process of at least ten years minimum.

# HOW YOU KEEP IT GOING?

Change work is exciting, energising, exhilarating, rewarding and satisfying. It can also be scary, hard, messy, complex and depressing

Working with BPE helps you celebrate and keeps your feet on the ground when things are going well. Working with BPE will help you keep your spirits up when times are hard and it feels like your efforts are not being rewarded.

Working with BPE will help you keep perspective and it will help keep you connected to your vision, your purpose and your principles.

We recommend a set of strategies provided and facilitated by BPE.

These have been developed from the research on school and teacher change and our extensive experience in working with leaders and teachers in schools.

## Strategies:

- Membership of the BPE national network.
- Each school has a BPE coach.
- All staff participate in an induction course in the BPE design.
- School visits, both national and international, to other Big Picture schools.
- Research including a significant school self evaluation process and external validation.
- BPE materials and support (including) online.
- Participation in annual National Conference.
- Participation in advanced workshops on the BPE design.



*We want our young folk to persist. We need to, too.*

# THE BIG PICTURE DISTINGUISHERS

There are a number of fundamental 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.



*We act.  
We reflect  
We plan.  
We try again.*

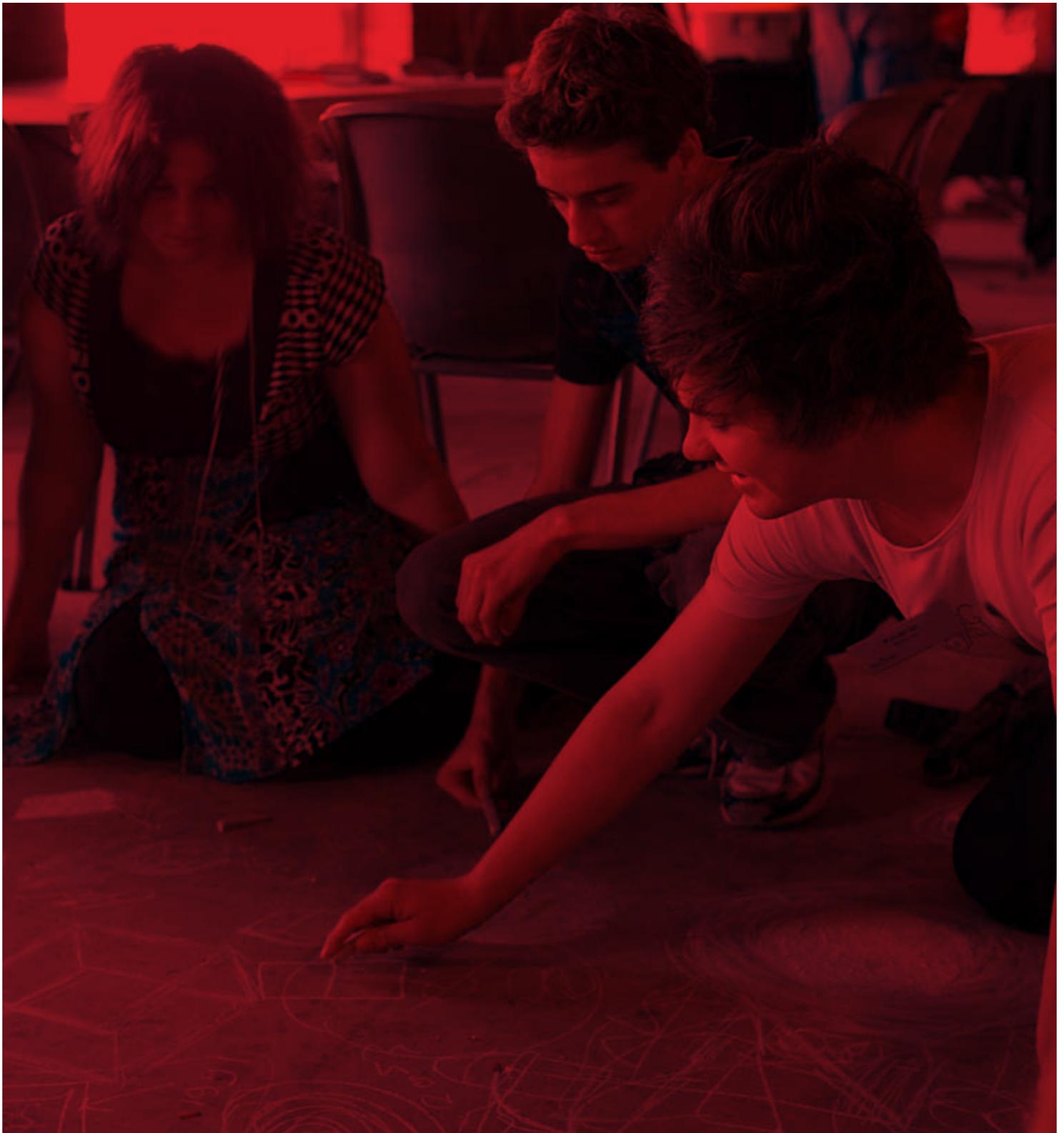
If you are interested in:

- learning more about the Big Picture Education design...
- finding out if the Big Picture Education design is for you...
- exploring some of the Big Picture ideas in practice...

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