

Big Picture Education Australia

Big Picture Education Australia aims to stimulate vital changes in Australian education by generating and sustaining innovative, personalised schools that work in partnership with their greater communities. The Big Picture network involves schools, education systems, universities and other communities. To learn more, visit: www.bigpicture.org.au



Samir at his internship with Pitt and Sherry Engineers

Governance

Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) is a not-for-profit company that was founded in 2006 by Viv White and John Hogan, both of whom have long histories in school reform. BPEA is an organisation governed by a network model. In practice, this means Big Picture has a Board of Directors and two co-managing directors who are all responsible for the work of the organisation. The Board is made up of education innovators and education experts with international experience, who are committed to education reform. Drawn from different states and territories across Australia, the directors each have very good local knowledge and their own networks. This governance model, while not without its challenges, gave BPEA the national reach and capacity to do the work from its inception.

At an operational level, BPEA uses professional contractors and employees to deliver services to schools, teachers and other stakeholders. It is funded by fee-for-service payments, philanthropic contributions and government grants (generally funded at the local level or 'hub'). The organisation was supported in its first two developmental years by Social Ventures Australia, which continued to provide in-kind and financial support through to the end of 2012. Other supporters have included the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation, the Trust Company, the Caledonia Foundation, the Origin Foundation,

the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation and the Snow Foundation. Education Departments from Tasmania, ACT and NSW have also supported specific initiatives.

To help guide the work, a research and evaluation framework was established. More recently, to ensure sound decision-making and evolution of the organisation, BPEA undertook two major reviews. These reviews, in 2012, were of operations (management) and governance (board) and led to a number of changes including the establishment of three standing committees to assist its work. These committees focus on matters to do with finance, research and the effectiveness of the Board.

Innovation

BPEA has a bold goal to create change and influence the future of education. The three features of the model are: 1) **one student at a time** – Students, in advisory groups with up to 16 others for four years, all have a personal learning plan which is based on their specific interests. It is developed with input from the students, their teacher/advisor and parents. It includes an individual project; 2) **a community of learners** – central to this feature is students working two days a week in an interest-based internship, called *Learning Through Internship* (LTI). The student works with a mentor from the community on a meaningful project relevant to the student's learning goals and connected to the curriculum via a learning plan. Students exhibit the outcomes of their work four times a year to a public audience; and 3) **small schools by design** – specific recommendations are set around total student numbers, teacher-to-student ratio and the creation of small school systems within one large school.

BPEA harnesses the community to help students learn. A central action is to create

The individual distinguishers are not unique. Many reforms have embraced these ideas. It is the combination of them as a whole that is the innovation... implementing the design all the way over time... (John Hogan, Founder BPEA)

community partnerships. Every internship is a partnership between school and community and this cooperation fosters mutual understanding and respect. An internship can happen in a museum, a motorcycle shop, or a parliamentarian’s office; the central focus is about the building of a relationship.

Twelve characteristics, called ‘distinguishers’ (or principles), are common to schools taking a Big Picture approach. These distinguishers can be viewed at the BPEA website: www.bigpicture.org.au

Big Picture Education Australia is an organisation of networkers undertaking transformational change in schools. We work deeply and over time with schools to make this happen (Viv White and John Hogan, Founders BPEA)

Many of the BPEA ideas evolved out of the Australian National Schools Network (ANSN) begun in 1991, along with Meg Wheatley’s thinking and writing around living systems (an approach to how systems are designed, developed and maintained). Beginning with schools in Western Australia and Tasmania, BPEA now has more than thirty sites across all Australian states and the ACT and is helping to establish the design in New Zealand. BPEA works in ‘distance education’ modes, in

regional and remote communities and in urban settings.

For many teachers, Big Picture learning is a different experience, representing significant change to their professional lives. To address this, most Big Picture schools or programs have an ongoing Big Picture coach, providing

hands-on professional development in the school and community. Several Foundation Training Programs were also conducted between 2006 and 2012 for around 2000 teachers.

Model

For BPEA, support from philanthropic foundations was critical in its developmental stages. Significant change has come through the relationship that BPEA has with government. The Commonwealth supports BPEA through school grants and professional development and state government systems invest substantial cash and capital in BPEA public schools.

We began with philanthropic support to BPEA. We still have that and we still need it. However, as the projects get larger and more complex, we are increasingly using government money to run those projects and that includes the services we provide. (Viv White, Founder BPEA)

Factors for effective engagement

(see all 10 factors on p. 22)

Apart from building its own capacity, the most important factor for BPEA in schools and across BPEA networks. For example, assistance from funders has ranged from support for BPEA’s business development and strategic thinking, to connections with like-minded organisations and people, and influence with government. The words we love to hear, says Viv White are “how can we help you? What do you need to make this work for you?”

The BPEA network is complex and international in its reach, with many stakeholders. It involves

Models over time

Guiding principles and practices BPEA uses to engage effectively with philanthropy ...

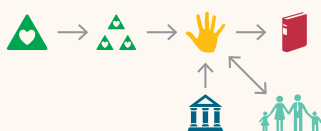
First wave



(Philanthropic foundations to BPEA to schools)

- *Don't be afraid to take a risk:* BPEA started as an organisation with a big and bold idea. The two founders were seen as imaginative social entrepreneurs and were approached by philanthropists who backed the idea.
- *Make the most of structures within which you work:* BPEA is an RTO with Charitable Tax Status and uses its foundation grants to train teachers, leaders and communities.

Second wave



(Philanthropic foundations to BPEA, enhanced by BPEA relationship to government and families enrolled as part of the design development, in support of schools)

- *Connect with policy makers:* A large part of BPEA activities has been to seek significant support from policy makers across the country for the Big Picture Education design.

sophisticated negotiations and partnership development with funders, governments and education systems. BPEA works hard to build trust and encourage reciprocity with its partners.

The education world at a systems level does not have a strong history or tradition with

philanthropy. This is especially the case with the public education systems that BPEA principally works with. Public schools do not have charitable status and nor do their systems. This is not to say that there has not been major support given to schools and programs in schools from foundations. Victoria has a strong history of that and it is growing elsewhere. But working with governments and philanthropy together to build transformational change is new. It is exciting but complex!

Impact

We believe Big Picture learning is a design for everyone, everywhere. One of our key aims is to demonstrate how Big Picture can work with different people in different places. (Peter Flynn, Communications Director BPEA)

What are the main outcomes?

BPEA is already finding evidence of positive outcomes for learners, particularly in improved student aspirations, learning outcomes and confidence. Changes are evident at the teacher level. In BPEA, the teacher is called a teacher/

advisor. It is not a traditional role. The teacher does not assume the sole role of transferring content to students. Rather, he or she advises the student about discovering their interests, preparing their plan for learning, connecting with mentors, designing their personalised curriculum and monitoring their learning.

The Origin Foundation supports the research into how students and teachers are implementing the BPEA design. The methodology and

research itself has been developed by academics from the University of Sydney, Murdoch University, the University of Melbourne and the University of Tasmania. Early indicators suggest positive improvement in attitudes, attendance, NAPLAN results and, most importantly, in individual student aspiration and confidence outcomes.

We believe we have genuinely achieved a high level of engagement. What has proved more complex for BPEA (but not impossible) is to get a three way level of engagement between philanthropy, schools and their education systems. (Viv White, Founder BPEA)

We see students who learn deeply, reason and apply knowledge. We see them reflect on their learning and develop strong relationships. We meet many students whose re-engagement with learning is profound. (John Hogan, Founder BPEA)

BPEA received significant support (\$700,000) from Murdoch University for major research and development of the model in Western Australia in 2013.

How is information gathered?

BPEA began in 2006, by undertaking a cost benefit analysis to determine whether or not the Big Picture design could be established in schools within the bounds of the existing government funding arrangements. With an affirmative result from this exercise, BPEA was able to commence start-up negotiations with education systems and schools that had expressed interest in the design.

The BPEA Board established a Research, Evaluation and Development Committee whose role was to design, administer and disseminate the findings of a range of research initiatives. These include case studies, surveys and independent studies by universities and other research organisations. Additionally, feedback is gained from the documented testimonials of students, teachers, mentors and parents.

How do you share the information gathered and with whom?

Not only does BPEA aim to design and sustain successful Big Picture Schools, it also has a goal to influence broadly both education policy and practice. It pursues this goal through its participation in national education policy work, by publishing in a range of different media and by connecting and sharing with the international group.

BPEA also now works across other networks to grow the ideas in schools that do not have the Big Picture design. This strategy includes partnerships with the Australian National Schools Network, Play for Life, The Beacon Foundation, Hands On Learning and with public schools in large district network groups in Western Australia, the ACT, Tasmania and Newcastle, NSW.

BPEA also established a Communications Group whose task it is to produce web-based and video resources, case studies, e-news, curriculum materials and other support resources for the schools and their communities. This group works with the Research Committee to develop communication and advocacy strategies that are derived from the research findings in order to advance the influence of the work.

It is profoundly different. Teacher advisors usually work intensely with a small number of students. The central engine of the school is the advisory group. Teachers know each student well and the learning relationship is strong. (Viv White, Founder BPEA)