
ENVISIONING NEW WAYS TO ORGANISE PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Schooling as it exists is no longer fit for purpose for a growing range of young people. Too many of our young people feel that they don't belong, that they can't learn in the ways they are expected to in school, that the curriculum does not engage their interest, or that the world beckons but school is making them wait until a certain age before they can explore it.

Their wellbeing and sense of fulfilment is in decline and many do not make it to the mandated Year 12 finishing line.

Concerned educators and families are questioning the increasingly inequitable school sector system in Australia, and the federal government's role in sustaining it, while those from low SES and disadvantaged backgrounds face the residualisation of public schooling and a lack of choice in schools that they can access.

Our young people need a new learning design that suits the world they currently live in, rather than a relic from the Industrial Age. And it needs to be accessible to all.

Teachers, too, need a way of organising schooling that brings the joy and purpose back to teaching and enables them to feel that they are making a real difference in young people's lives.

For decades the response has been to introduce micro-reforms, tighten standardisation of content and assessment, blame the quality of teachers, point the finger at 'school refusers' and their parents, and lament any 'decline' in performance in the PISA rankings.

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Yet as a society, we never question whether the way we ‘do’ school is actually the problem. Consider the questions below.

- Do we need multiple subjects, teachers and classrooms in a day? Does this fracturing of the day assist anyone to learn?
- Is there such a thing as canons of knowledge that all young people need to learn at the same time and pace? Or are there now many ways for young people to access skills and knowledge as and when they need it?
- What if young people were allowed to shape and drive their own learning around things that interest them? If they could learn about things that were relevant to them and had the agency to pursue these areas in depth, instead of being hustled on to the next topic in a syllabus that has been pre-ordained?
- What if students weren't forced to fit into a rigid system of learning designed to be one-size fits-all, but able to learn in ways that suit their brain, or their learning style and preferences?
- Could we measure young people's progress by what they can do, say and demonstrate, rather than by standardised written exams?
- Should all education be a competition for a few top ATAR rankings while the achievements of other young people are assumed to be mediocre?
- Does all learning need to occur within the walls of school? Why not encourage regular internships in the community with mentors to access the latest in thinking and technology?
- Imagine if teachers had the time to form supportive relationships with a small group of students, rather than be superficially acquainted with over 300?
- Imagine if young people were listened to, and known well by at least one adult in school and felt that they mattered? How different an experience would that be for many of our 'school refusers'?
- What if school was a safe, inclusive learning environment for those with anxiety and other mental health issues, for those with ASD/ADHD, or for young LGBTQIA+ people? Where learning in small communities with familiar peers and a consistent teacher (instead of mixing with multitudes every day) was a key plank of wellbeing?

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- What if teachers were not content specialists, but learning guides equipped to assist young people to develop their independent learning skills instead of spoon-feeding content?
 - What if teachers could really feel that they were making a difference to young people's lives by working in a more personalised and guiding way, rather than being a repository of content and assessments? Would that reduce their burn-out rates?

We are living in a period of flux and opportunity and it's time to rethink convention, compliance, and excessive standardisation when it comes to education.

The Big Picture Design for Learning is one approach to changing the way we do secondary schooling and learning that has been successfully implemented in Australia for over 18 years. (It is also implemented in the USA, Canada, Italy, Barbados and Kenya.)

There are other educators out there advocating for big change and putting ideas into practice. And there are bright young people with significant experiences and views. Let's put students at the centre of schooling and ask them:

- How do you learn best?
- What do you want or need to learn?
- How can we support you?
- What would make you want to come to school and to experience the joy of learning?

Let's give a voice to innovative initiatives and advocate for change in the ways we perceive and organise schooling. Our young people are worth it.



ABOUT THE BIG PICTURE DESIGN FOR LEARNING

One student at a time in a community of learners

The Big Picture Learning Design is implemented in over 45 school settings around Australia in a range of urban, regional and remote settings. It is about a personalised approach to learning that is having success with all sorts of students, (academically-oriented, hands-on learners, sporty, arty, indigenous, disengaged, those with mental health issues or a disability) and helping them to transition to pathways to employment, further training and university.

The design's key planks are around doing school differently:

- new ways of organising school structures and culture around students, rather than the timetable,
- new forms of learning, including students learning through personal interests, students learning in the real world through connecting with expert mentors in fields that interest them, and learning in a supportive small group with a consistent teacher,
- new measures for assessing learning, including a new credential for end-of-school assessment accepted by over 17 Australian universities (known as the International Big Picture Learning Credential).

Our students are finding their passions for such diverse areas as: biomedicine and health science, disability advocacy, midwifery, mechatronics, software engineering, psychology, 3D animation, media, aquaculture, environmental and Antarctic science... to name just a few of the many careers Big Picture students have successfully gravitated towards.



Further details about the Big Picture Learning Design can be found here:

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au>

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/destination-study-2023>

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/media>