



LEARNING AUSTRALIA

ONE STUDENT AT A TIME IN
A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

Response to the Consultation Paper

From

Big Picture Learning Australia

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Introduction

Schooling as it exists unfortunately no longer suits a growing range of young people. Too many 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.

Big Picture Learning Australia (BPLA)'s response to this challenge has been to offer an innovative personalised approach to learning in a supportive environment, both inside and outside school, that puts students and their interests first, connects them with opportunities to learn with mentors in the community, and is achieving excellent results in engagement and post-school transitions¹.

In 2020, BPLA introduced the *International Big Picture Learning Credential* (IBPLC)², which takes a personalised approach to end-of-school assessment and certification. This is a new, non-ATAR credential that is warranted by the University of Melbourne, accepted by 17 Australian universities, and recognised in NSW by the Department of Education. Many Big Picture Learning (BPL) graduates have successfully been using the IBPLC to gain entry to university, to training or to employment.

Please visit our website to learn more about the IBPLC:

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/what-international-big-picture-learning-credential>

BPL has thus been able to introduce an important 'choice' for young people, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, who to date have not had recourse to any other means of doing school. It works for all 'categories' of students by attending to who they are as a person, noticing and connecting them to their interests, their goals, and acknowledging their capabilities.

Our submission

In this submission, we at Big Picture Learning Australia have chosen to respond to the first three themes outlined in the Public Consultation Paper — around defining educational success; strengthening learner support and engagement; and achieving end-of-schooling outcomes — as these themes resonate most strongly with our purpose and with the results of active implementation of the Big Picture Learning design over 18 years in 45 schools around Australia.

We are confident that the innovative BPL design for learning more than satisfies this Review's criteria of being:

¹ See the BPLA 2023 *Destination Study* that tracks the transitions of BPL graduates to post-school destinations and the *Longitudinal Study of BPLA's University Pathway Students*

² See attached letter from Professor Sandra Milligan, the University of Melbourne that is warranting the IBPLC standards.

- supported by evidence
- able to be implemented
- impactful.

The benefits of the design for young people in secondary schooling has been evidenced by numerous research studies, and the design is successfully being implemented both in Australia and overseas where it is achieving excellent results in retaining young people in schooling, introducing them to interest-led learning and helping them transition to destinations of their choice after school.

Please visit our research page to learn more about our evidence:

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/research-projects>

Although we know that many young people in Tasmania would benefit from being able to do BPL, we are not seeking for BPL to become ‘the system’.

However we *are* looking to:

- **give more students in more schools around Tasmania access to the Big Picture Learning approach**
- **have its end-of-school credential — the International Big Picture Learning Credential — recognised as a credible pathway within the Tasmanian Education System.**

In the rest of this submission, we will first explain a little about the Big Picture Learning Design and its history in Tasmania, before addressing this Review’s key themes and questions from a Big Picture perspective.

About the Big Picture Learning Design

BPLA (a not-for-profit organisation) was set up in 2006, to address concerns about many of the issues which are still impacting young people today such as the link between disadvantage and academic achievement, falling levels of engagement and wellbeing, and increasing numbers of young people not finding a fulfilling pathway to life after school.

The Big Picture Learning Design is a different way of learning, and consequently of organising a school so that its structures support the culture and practices of the learning design. It is underpinned by a set of ‘12 Distinguishers’ that outline the ethos for learning, leading working and connecting with community in a Big Picture Learning setting.³

Key elements of the design

The design approaches learning, school, assessment and credentialling differently:

- Students learn through their personal interests and passions according to **Personal Learning Plans** negotiated with their teacher and family.
- There is no standardised curriculum. Instead, students connect their learning to 6 rigorous **Learning Goals**⁴.
- Students don’t move between subjects or multiple classrooms and teachers according to a pre-set timetable.
- Instead, they learn in **advisories of 17 students** with one consistent advisory teacher (over 2- 6 years), where there is a strong culture of support and positive relationships between students, peers and teachers.
- Every student also does real-world learning on **internships** with adult mentors 1- 2 days a week. They work in depth around their field of interest, while also testing out career paths and building their social capital.
- Students can also undertake school subjects, external courses, training certificates, seminars, or on-country learning that are connected to their interests.
- **Assessment is via exhibition**, presented by each student every term. There are no standardised exams.

³ See the document *The 12 Distinguishers*

⁴ Refer to the *Big Picture Learning Goals*

- The advent of the **International Big Picture Learning Credential** means that students can complete all their secondary schooling using the Big Picture Learning Design. The IBPLC is at least the equivalent to other Australian Senior Secondary Certificates. (Milligan, 2024))

The BPL design is implemented in 300 schools internationally (in the USA, Canada, Barbados, New Zealand, the UK, Italy, the Netherlands and Kenya), and 45 schools in Australia.

In Australia the majority of BPL campuses are an academy within a mainstream school, and there are also whole-school campuses in Launceston, Perth, Busselton, Bunbury, Roebourne, Croydon (Victoria), Gosford and Newcastle.

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

https://www.bigpicture.org.au/files/media_panes/2024-design-explainer.pdf

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/research-projects>

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

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

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/what-international-big-picture-learning-credential>

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/news/explicit-teaching-inquiry-learning-big-picture-design-learning>

Big Picture Learning in Tasmania

The Big Picture Learning Design has been implemented in Tasmania since 2007. There are currently two BPL schools in operation – the **Launceston Big Picture School**⁵, and the **Big Picture Academy at Hobart City High School**.

The models for implementation in Tasmania have been the BPL ‘academy within a mainstream school’, as seen at Hobart City High School, and the ‘whole-school’ model as seen at Launceston Big Picture School.

There is also a pilot program known as ‘**B-Unbound**’ being developed in both cities to offer off-site learning to young people currently not engaged in education, employment or training, and to connect them to their interests and to internship opportunities in the community. This is a joint initiative between the Department for Education, Children and Young People and BPLA.

Both schools in Tasmania offer the BPL design and International Big Picture Learning Credential (IBPLC) all the way through from Year 9 to Year 12. This means that students do not have to leave their high school after Year 10 and change to a senior college, so there is continuity of learning environment, advisory teacher and peers. This is having a positive effect on retention and completion rates in these two BPL schools.

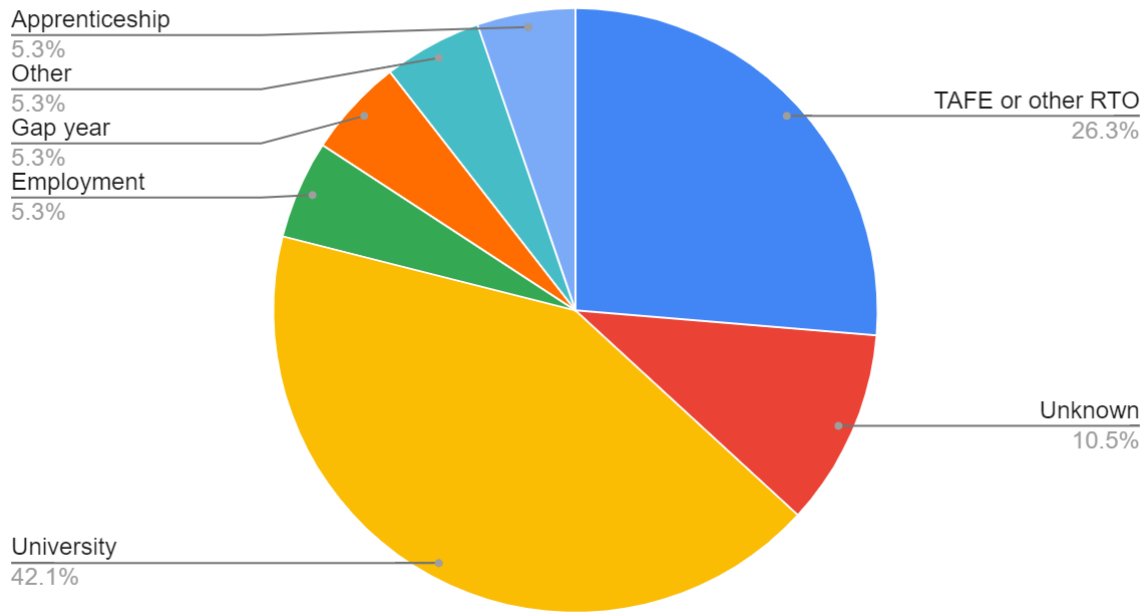
Note: BPLA will forward the data from the schools once the holiday break is over and the two Tasmanian BPL schools have been able to confirm the accuracy of the data in this area.

According to a BPLA Destination Study tracking all graduates, in Tasmania in 2023:

- 42.1% of BPL graduates went to university
- 5.3% went into employment
- 26.3% went to TAFE or to an RTO
- 5.3% went into an apprenticeship
- 10.5% were unknown

⁵ See the 2020 *Evaluation of the Launceston Big Picture School* prepared by the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, University of Tasmania.

Students' destination in 2023 (Tasmania)



84.21% of Tasmanian BPL students had a destination linked to the personal interests they had pursued while in a BPL school.

Source: 2023 Destination Study, BPLA

In 2024, there are 18 Tasmanian students are on a university pathway to study courses including: Computing, Fine Arts, Teaching, Marine Studies, Media & Communications, Music, Paramedicine and Psychology.

Theme 1 – Defining educational success

What does success look like after the formal years of schooling in the Tasmanian context and how do we better encourage young people to achieve?

Q: What do you think are the reasons for finishing Year 12?

A good fit for their learning style

For many Big Picture students, the reasons for finishing Year 12 are firstly that they have found a place to learn that is a good ‘fit’ for their learning style.

Students enjoy being in charge of the way they organise their learning and many report that they appreciate being able to learn at a depth or pace that suits the way their brain functions, or gives them some independence. This means that they can enjoy learning and have discovered strengths and ambitions that may previously have gone undetected.

I get to pick my own schedule, so if I want to do something, like more maths one day, I can do more maths that day. But if I want to do more drawing, I can do that too. Instead of having a rigid “At this time I have to do this and then at this time I have to do that.” (Sammy, Year 11)

I always thought that I was really dumb in mainstream and I kind of realised that I am kind of smart. So I got an opportunity to learn my way. (Lily, Year 12)

I like learning by doing and seeing instead of like, hearing or just someone being like “Read this and do it”. I don’t really understand that. It goes in one ear and out the other. So definitely being able to go out and do things and being able to learn by picking what I want to learn about has made it a lot easier. (Sienna, Year 11)

Interest and agency

Secondly, during their time in Big Picture, students have found their interests and passions and had plenty of time to explore, shape and drive their learning around these, and to formulate ideas of where they would like to take their interests next. This helps them to commit to finishing Year 12. They can envisage a future for themselves and want to do the work to get there.

I went through mainstream thinking I was bad at maths, because it wasn’t taught in a way I understood or like to engage with. Topics came and went week by week and they felt too hard to understand and it felt like things were moving too quickly. But because I set my own curriculum at Big Picture, I started slowly building up through textbooks and filling in some of the foundational gaps I missed. And I learnt that I really, really enjoyed maths learning at Big Picture. (Finley, Year 10)

Flexible pathways all the way through to Year 12

The added advantage of BPL is that it doesn't fix a student into a specific pathway that becomes a rut. Certainly, some fix themselves with a particular goal from early on - because they know what they want. But some change as they learn. As they learn they come to love learning. This can change them. BPL is flexible. The student can change their focus, their work and their direction. BPL facilitates the shift rather than puts blocks in their way.

So I did a filmmaking course because that's what I was really interested in at the time. It ran from February to November and I got a Certificate in Visual Arts because of it. But I also learnt that I did not enjoy filmmaking as much as I was hoping I would...If I didn't do any out-learning and I was still set on filmmaking and then I went out and was on a film set and then learned I hated it as a job, that would suck because that would be what I was doing for work. But I got to realise that early on, which is good." (Ben, Year 12, currently pursuing scriptwriting)

Consistency from the junior to senior years

Thirdly, the Big Picture Learning design enables a student to complete all of their learning through to Year 12 in the one place (ideally their local high school), without having to change school at the end of Year 10 and travel (often quite long distances) to go to a senior college.

From the support that I have here [Hobart Big Picture Academy] and all the opportunities that I've got going on at the moment while being in Big Picture, I knew that this was the place that I was going to thrive at. Here I have that passionate advisor that wants you to be able to do so much with yourself so they really help you to get all those opportunities. So that's why I stayed. (Aleira, Year 12)

This is possible, even in small regional schools, because the BPL design does not require multiple specialist teachers, a broad range of subjects and a complex timetable in order to offer learning opportunities to senior students.

Instead, one advisory of 17 students and a single advisory teacher can support 17 young people on different trajectories to access the learning and experiences that they need to successfully transition to a destination after school.

This is possible because the host school of a Big Picture Academy is no longer the repository of all the resources and facilities for learning. In the Big Picture Learning design, the community is enlisted to support its young people through internships that provide access to the latest skills and technologies. Students can also pursue external courses and qualifications while remaining enrolled in school.

Q: What does success look like during and after the formal years of schooling in Tasmania?

Post-school plans

In BPL, all senior students produce well-researched Post-School Plans that canvas their work or study options, that seek to match their skills, knowledge and experiences to a future career, and consider such aspects as travel, living arrangements, qualifications, licences, financial or social aspects and things such as ABNs and Tax File Numbers.

A step ahead

As a result of the BPL design's emphasis on learning outside school on internships or external courses during high school, many young people leave school with qualifications and experience that put them a step ahead of other young people their age. They have spent significant time in the field developing their networks, understanding the practices and how things 'work', and learning to develop their expertise. For example, they may already have completed a Certificate 2 or 3 in a field of interest while still at school and are ready to transfer directly into employment or into a higher course level. While the completion of certificates is not unique to BPL, it is something that is encouraged and facilitated.

The video link below is about Immy from Hobart City High School's Big Picture Academy. She exemplifies how Big Picture is enabling her to emerge from secondary schooling as a qualified fitness instructor:

Immy's Story: A Step Ahead

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/file/immys-story-step-ahead>

A meaningful credential

The IBPLC awarded to school graduates can be used to gain entry to work, training or university. It combines a young person's assessment results, with personalised information about their best work, personal achievements and experiences, and provides meaningful insights for employers and university admission centres into a young person's capabilities and qualities.

It celebrates who the young person is rather than reduces them to a score or number.

The IBPLC acknowledges the young person – their competence, their capability, their skill, their knowledge and importantly who they are. Its digital transcript keeps their work visible, assesses them against a set of standards which in turn indicate what they are now ready to do. It is a credential and an approach to learning that helps the young person find the best match for what they do next.

For more information:

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/what-international-big-picture-learning-credential>

Tracking destinations

In Big Picture, we consider success to be having a destination to go to after school, in employment, training or tertiary study. Each year, BPLA tracks the transitions of its graduates in an annual Destination Study. We also count those who leave school early to take up an apprenticeship or traineeship. Last year's study can be read here: <https://www.bigpicture.org.au/destination-study-2023>

This study informs BPLA not only about successful outcomes but also types of partnerships and opportunities we can be seeking out and planning for, in order to benefit future students.

In addition, Big Picture students tend to develop confidence and an ability to interact with a range of adults due to their experiences of regularly connecting with mentors throughout their schooling.

It has just helped me build my confidence and you know, my purpose. So being out in the workplace, meeting my crowd of people, it's just guided me on the right path. (Chloe, Year 12, interested in nursing and aged care)

My communication skills have probably gone through the roof since being here [on a traineeship] and having to keep those formal conversations going with all the different people in there. I put myself up to a standard that I need to keep and it's been really helpful to help me grow as a person. (Aleira, Year 12)

Q: How can we better encourage students to aspire to and achieve their ambitions?

Choice and independence

The Big Picture Learning Design gives students the time and space to achieve on their own terms, rather than at the behest of the syllabus, a teacher or a pending exam. They thrive through intrinsic motivation rather than compliance with external pressures, but always with guidance and scaffolding from advisory teachers.⁶

Out-learning

As mentioned above, the focus on learning through interests, and learning through internships allows students to discover what they enjoy and, importantly, what they do not enjoy. Big Picture students are able to explore a diverse range of fields that don't necessarily occur in the traditional school syllabi. This naturally inspires passions and ambitions.

For example, Aleira, a Year 12 student at Hobart City High School's Big Picture Academy, has a keen interest in community advocacy and politics. She has been working in a traineeship 1 – 2 days a week at Tasmania's Parliament House during her final years of schooling. This has given her invaluable insights into the processes and machinations of the political system, access to a variety of mentors and role models,

⁶ See document *Explicit Teaching & Inquiry Learning in the Big Picture design for learning*, BPLA, 2024

and given her a plethora of options to consider for her post-school options including both employment and university study.

It's opened up lots of possibilities and ideas. My head is flooded with what I would like to do. My biggest thing that I would want to do is, if I were to be offered a job there at the end of school, I would take that with not a thought about it, but I still think I would like to do the university pathway as well. (Aleira, Year 12)

View Aleira's story here:

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/file/aleiras-story-passion-politics>

Big Picture students are pursuing passions for such diverse areas as: air craft mechanics, animal care, carpentry, health science, disability advocacy, environmental and Antarctic science, fitness, IT, midwifery, permaculture, psychology, software engineering, trout farming, 3D animation, ... to name just a few of the many fields Big Picture students have successfully gravitated towards.

Theme 2 - Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education

How can we collectively support Tasmanian learners to get the most out of their entire education experience and ensure all students reach their potential?

Q: What supports help families to support their young people in learning?

In the Big Picture Learning Design, the connection with family begins at enrolment. They visit the school, attend information events, speak to advisory teachers and current BPL students.

Then, once enrolled, families are invited to participate in their child's learning at least twice a term, by participating in learning plan meetings at the beginning of term, and attending exhibitions of their child's learning at each term's conclusion.

Many families have expressed how their child talks to them and seeks advice about their projects and how much they enjoy seeing their child feel a sense of pride and accomplishment when presenting their learning each term.

So the learning planning is really, really useful for me to see the input that comes from his advisor in his classroom and other support people, and it also means I can align myself at home to be having the right conversations with my child around that learning plan. (Christie, a parent)

This is not the norm in secondary schooling where many parents feel excluded from their child's learning and limited to receiving school reports, or attending one round of parent teacher interviews a year. There is little opportunity to intervene on behalf of their child where needed, or sadly, little cause to celebrate their achievements when not present to witness them.

BPLA recognises that not all students are living with their families so when it comes to learning planning and exhibitions, we try to involve other key people/carers in their life in order to weave a net of supportive relationships around that student.

Encouraging and valuing family/carer participation in key stages of a young person's learning cycle builds important bridges between a child's school and home lives.

Q: What can be done to better support students who are struggling or at risk of falling behind to get back on track?

In BPL we don't use terms like 'falling behind' and 'getting back on track'. We don't see learning as strictly linear nor a race to get to the end point. We want young people to have the time to enjoy the journey and have input into the destination.

In BPL students are often grouped together based on age but they do not all need to learn at the same pace. We also prefer not to assume that a young person needs 'fixing' and instead work to make changes to the setting or practices surrounding the student that will enable them to fit, and to flourish.

Many students 'struggle' in traditional schooling because the standard pedagogy does not fit them because they are neurodiverse, or have a learning disability, or are a kinaesthetic learner rather than a visual one, or are simply bored, etc.

When a young person is not coping at school and they see no alternatives on offer, their only option is to drop out. There is little point in 'catching them up' only to deposit them back into a system that has already failed them. BPL can be that important option for them.

A learning design for everyone

The BPL design can cater to and has had success with all sorts of students, including academically-oriented, hands-on, arty, indigenous, sporty, disengaged learners, or those with mental ill health or a disability. It is highly structured yet also flexible enough to suit a diverse range of preferences and needs.

Feeling noticed

In a BPL setting, every young person is 'noticed' due to the small size of the learning advisory or academy. Having a single advisory teacher means that there is someone at school who checks in with them each day to ascertain their emotional and intellectual wellbeing. It becomes quickly apparent to a teacher if a young person is becoming distracted, anxious, disengaged, or has stopped working or attending. Once this has been noticed, it can be attended to early.

Inclusion

A NSW study⁷ of the impact of the BPL design on engagement, learning and transitions for students with mental health issues and/or disability found that since enrolling in BPL, students report fewer incidences of bullying, more support from teachers, higher levels of school satisfaction and feel more positive about their futures. The Executive Summary and full report can be read here:

<https://www.bigpicture.org.au/how-well-are-we-going>

Students with **disability** are benefiting from learning at a pace and depth and in ways that suit their needs and learning preferences.

⁷ Dr Deborah Chadwick, *How Well Are We Going?* BPLA, 2021

For example, students with **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** have indicated that the reduction of movement between classrooms, teachers and subjects throughout the day and the ability to create their own learning structures and routines greatly reduces anxiety.

Students with **dyslexia** have said that they benefit from the opportunities for real-world learning that helps them to develop skills and understanding before reading texts and studying theory.

*The mainstream learning style, it just doesn't suit everyone because everyone has different brains. I have ADHD and dyslexia and it just didn't work for me. However this [Big Picture Learning] definitely does. And I just think there needs to be more options for people to be able to learn and get the best out of education that they can.
(Layla, Yr11)*

Experience is showing that the Big Picture design is highly effective with young people suffering from **mental health issues**, as it helps them to feel secure, supported and therefore disposed to learn throughout this time.

Students with mental ill health and/or disability also benefit from other aspects of the BPL design, including:

- The focus on strengths rather than deficits encourages students to work to improve their own performance rather than be compared to others.
- Flexible approaches to assessment allow students to negotiate an appropriate mode for their needs (visual and/or oral presentations rather than standardised written tests, for example).

High potential and gifted students

High-achieving students in BPL settings are not constrained by pre-determined syllabi, or the pace of the majority of the class. They are encouraged to explore as deeply or as broadly as they wish. No ceiling is put on what their progress can be. This precludes them from becoming bored or disengaged by their schooling and supports them to work to their full potential.

BPLA has had students who pursue pure mathematics or computing science at the university level, or who produce and broadcast their own syndicated radio program while still in high school.

In BPLA's experience, when students are offered some choice in the way schooling is done, they are more likely to persevere. The Big Picture design is a potential option for more schools or 'hubs' of schools in regional Tasmania.

Q: How can we ensure all Tasmanian learners get the most out of their education and reach their full potential?

Integrating wellbeing with learning

Creating a comfortable and stable learning environment that contributes to wellbeing is part of the answer. In Big Picture Learning academies, the advisory of 17 students with a consistent teacher (ideally from 2-6 years) is the base unit of organisation. This has been found to be conducive to the development of supportive relationships and camaraderie and a corresponding diminishment of behavioural incidents.

Many students report a sense of belonging in their advisory, positive social relationships, and a feeling that they matter to their teacher, all of which contribute to the young person's wellbeing and allow them to give attention to their learning.

People really look after you here. And there's always a sort of 'yes' attitude to everything you want to learn about. (Lily, Year 12)

Additionally, encouraging learners to forge connections with mentors and to regularly do internships, while getting exposure to the latest in thinking, technology and skills in fields of personal interest, allows students to get a glimpse of their potential and to formulate plans for their future.

While there are few requirements to enter a Big Picture setting (it is for all learners who wish to try learning in a different way), there is also no ceiling for where it can take a young person. The design supports a young person to find out what they want to try, know and do, and supports them to get there.

I like this way of learning, I like being able to drive myself. I already know what I want to do, I want to work with animals, right? That's all I want to do. So Big Picture really enabled me to focus and hone in on that one thing. (Josh, Year 12, interns at a local zoo and is planning to study ecology at university)

Theme 3 – Outcomes at the conclusion of the formal years of schooling

How can we improve attendance, retention, attainment and student outcomes to better support choice of learning and career pathways?

Many of BPLA's answers to this question have already been outlined in our response to Themes 1 and 2.

In general, the learning environment and 'culture' of BPL schools contributes to students who feel less anxious about attending school, more positive about their capacities as learners, well supported by both peers and their teacher, and therefore able to engage with learning ambitions.

They have also tested out their interests in the world outside school, worked alongside mentors, and have become confident in their post-school choices.

BPLA believes that the most effective ways to achieve the desired outcomes described in this theme are to:

- 1. Expand the number of BPL campuses in Tasmania so that more young people have access to a personalised approach to learning and the opportunity to explore interests and potential careers/pathways while still in school.**
- 2. Encourage schools to offer the BPL design from the junior high school years through to Year 12 in order to maintain the consistency of supportive relationships and learning environment throughout a young person's secondary school years.**
- 3. Consider the BPL academy as an important alternative to the college system or distance education in the senior years, particularly in isolated rural areas.**
- 4. Encourage and endorse the IBPLC pathway as a credible end-of-school qualification for all Tasmanians.**

Conclusion

At the end of 2024, 379 BPL students around Australia will be completing Year 12 and being awarded their IBPLC. The numbers are growing every year. They are moving into destinations that they have chosen, often their first choice, and often strongly linked to interests and internships that they have pursued during their time in Big Picture.

As we prepare for the 2024 Destination Study to track our graduates, BPLA is building an important evidence base of the impact we are having on young people's lives across the country.

After 18 years, we also have a wealth of experience and evidence of what it takes to implement the design fully and with integrity in schools, through the work of BPL coaches who support each campus in the network, and through the ongoing training and networking opportunities that BPLA offers for advisory teachers and school leaders.

BPL advisory teachers report feeling energised and supported by the BPL network. They are experiencing an alignment between their vocation and good outcomes for students. More importantly they are feeling that they are making a difference in young people's lives.

The Big Picture Learning design is a tried and proven strategy for improving engagement and retention in secondary school, addressing equity and wellbeing, and preparing young people uncommonly well for their lives after school.

We are committed to growing this work and expanding the opportunities for Tasmania's current and next generations of learners.

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