

## A submission from Big Picture Learning Australia to the report *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce*

(Referred to as 'the report')

**September 2025**

### **Introduction**

The focus of our submission is on the section of the report entitled:

#### **'1. The best resources to improve school student outcomes.'**

This section includes a range of questionable assumptions and, as a consequence, reduces the effectiveness of the recommendations. In particular, the report adopts a 'mainstream' view of schools, their purpose, how they are structured, operate, and how they should serve their students. The Commission doesn't adequately consider the diversity of Australia's schools, it simply assumes that mainstream schools and settings are adequate to the tasks it is asking of them.

By doing this, the report misses an opportunity to acknowledge that authentically different approaches to learning might better enhance the implementation of the report's recommendations. Indeed, by assuming that all schools are much the same, the report potentially risks, as do many other school-based reform initiatives, sidelining those amongst Australia's best schools.

By way of illustration, this submission refers to the well-researched success of the over 50 Big Picture Learning schools and academies in Australia (see section 1 below). These predominantly public high schools offer an existing and successful learning design, one which already substantially makes use of technology (including artificial intelligence) in a setting which doesn't leave any students behind.

This submission will also highlight sections of the report which confirm our concerns (see section 2 below), in the hope that the Commission will broaden the scope of its report to recognise and encourage existing learning designs and schools which are extremely well-placed to implement AI and make an enhanced contribution to productivity.

## 1. What is Big Picture Learning?

[Big Picture Learning Australia](#) has a focus on engaging students who learn through personal interests and connections to opportunities both inside and outside school, all supporting the transition to meaningful post-school pathways, including university. In a typical BPL school or academy within a school:

- 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 (Empirical Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Social Reasoning, Communications, Knowing How To Learn and Personal Qualities).
- Every student regularly learns on internships with adult mentors in the community to develop meaningful skills and knowledge in their fields of interest, test out career paths, and build their social capital.
- Students can also undertake school subjects, external courses, seminars, or on-country learning that are connected to their interests.
- Students don't move between subjects or multiple classrooms and teachers according to timetable or prescribed curriculum. Instead, they learn in advisories of 17 students with one consistent advisory teacher, where there is a strong culture of support and positive relationships between students, peers and teachers.
- Assessment is via exhibition, presented by each student every term. There are no standardised exams. The advent of the [International Big Picture Learning Credential](#) (IBPLC) means that students can complete all their secondary schooling using the Big Picture Learning Design without requiring an ATAR and still attain entry to one of 18 partner universities around Australia.
- The uptake of technology and AI in Big Picture schools is inevitably very high, in part due to the substantial research component of their studies.

Big Picture Learning schools and academies perform well in terms of conventional measures of achievement, but extremely well in the indicators of engagement in learning for the long term. Research and evaluation of the design and student achievement is a priority, as indicated by [recent research](#) pertaining to NSW. The evidence has long indicated a strong track record, including in academic performance, retention and transition to further education, training, or employment.

We note in the *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce* report that the Commission has previously explored the link between student outcomes and future productivity growth - and that the report stresses that work-related training is essential to improving productivity. But the report seems to assume that this only takes place in small and medium enterprises, beyond the school years.

The Big Picture Learning approach to work-related learning is much deeper, earlier, long-term and linked to student engagement. The schools prepare students for opportunities beyond school with an emphasis on relevance and real-world learning. Students combine academic work with regular learning on internships and courses outside school. This approach is

stimulating ideas for future careers, building networks, and equipping students with skills and qualifications that will put them a step ahead upon graduation. Work-related training is not an add-on (or even an 'add-after') to school. It is part of their learning life – and learning for life.

## **2. Implications for the report?**

The above information about Big Picture Learning explains why we question so many statements in the report. Following are some of these statements and why we find them troubling.

**Page 1** (of the report): The *“average worker will ... need to learn new skills and adapt to new tasks and contexts”*

It's too late if adaptability around learning is left until after students leave school. It has to start and succeed in schools. The capacity of people to learn and relearn as they go through life fundamentally depends on their belief in learning and how it could make a difference to their lives. The current reality is that conventional schooling, which includes an overload of prescribed curriculum, and even prescribed lessons (as proposed in the report) has an opportunity cost in the form of less engagement by learners - with inevitably less commitment to, and belief in, learning.

At the very least the report should enable schools to ensure that learning is enjoyable, engaging, sufficiently student-centred and future-focused. We understand that such approaches seem to be counter to the culture and process of top-down 'learning' encouraged in the report – but the reality is that not all or even most students respond as the various reformers might like.

**Page 1:** *“...the creation of a single, national platform to host lesson planning, curriculum and support materials”.*

At first sight this seems to be useful and appropriate, especially given that teachers, as well as students, would need to be quickly upskilled. It is not a new idea and presumably the authors of the report had a close look at evidence for the success of similar efforts in the past. But it risks coming on top of an increase in mandates relating to teaching practice and an effective narrowing of curriculum to meet the demands for specific student outcomes. It comes across as yet another part of a teacher-blame agenda.

Such developments risk inhibiting teacher professionalism while reducing student choice and engagement. Ideas for better lessons are always welcome, but teaching isn't a 'colour by number' profession. Any centralised lesson platform would additionally need to be very responsive, year after year, to the rapid changes in the required content and skills. It also risks de-skilling teachers who will still need to understand the subject, understand their learners and plan or amend lessons. None of this should be considered to be an excessive use of time, as implied on page 7.

**Page 7:** *“Student ability in Australian classrooms varies significantly. Outcomes are stagnating and some students are being left behind”.*

Left behind what? And who? And how much does it matter? Which outcomes are stagnating? And do they represent the wider purpose of school education? Even a casual understanding of Big Picture Learning approach reveals the notion of 'left behind' to be a very inadequate generalisation. Student ability does vary, but a greater focus on individual students forces a rethink on what constitutes ability. The report assumes that ability is academic, and needs to always be assessed against a rigid set of preferred outcomes, followed by judgments about which students are 'left behind' because they somehow don't tick all the right boxes. The IBPLC is an example of a better-balanced credential. It not only reveals what students know, it shows what they can do across a broader range of capabilities than is conventional.

**Page 7/8:** *"When students realise their full potential through education, national productivity grows"*

Far too often, potential is assessed through a narrow lens created by the dominant purpose of schooling (which changes over time) and the achievement targets designed by others beyond the school gate.

What matters to students and what will engage and extend their attention varies considerably. Each student in a Big Picture Learning school faces very few barriers to realising his/her full potential. The closeness of support, the flexibility of their curriculum, combined with an insistence on rigour, means that students are able to concentrate on their goals, while embracing the wider learning needed to achieve these. Even the assessment and end of school credentialling serves these purposes.

There are clear productivity benefits if young people are able to experience success and realise their potential sooner rather than later. The power of real-world learning, supported by regular internships, ensures that they finish their school years with a very clear idea of who and where they want to be. They know about their chosen career and both employers and tertiary education providers recognise that they 'hit the ground running' in their chosen fields. They are the least likely to be *"left in lower-productivity roles"* (Page 8).

**Page 8:** *"Students' educational levels are diverse"*.

Assumptions about this are common in the report and they underpin a belief that there is a hierarchy of levels of achievement in things that are mandated through curriculum, assessment – and in recent years (including in this report) in specific teaching practice and purpose. In school education achievement goals and levels seem always to be externally derived, hence 'diversity' is displayed in a hierarchy of achievements.

What is missing is a realisation that student background, learning passions and goals are diverse in ways that, if allowed, can create interest and purpose in their learning, accompanied by substantial achievement. But this is far less possible in school structures which are designed to push young people towards a more rigid set of goals, in effect to to jump through pre-ordained hoops. It seems that the role of school reform, implicit in the report, is to double down on this process, regardless of the impact on student engagement,

confidence and commitment, and eventually on attendance, retention, and ultimate achievement and livelihood.

**Page 13:** *“The national schooling architecture provides a foundation for further reform”*

At best this is debatable, but at the very least such a statement reveals a lack of understanding of how Australia’s framework of schools functions ... and why it frequently doesn’t.

The Commission itself has previously acknowledged quite wide barriers to school reform in Australia. In its 2023 [Review of the National School Reform Agreement](#) it identified that the concentration of disadvantaged students into disadvantaged schools is [a systemic inefficiency](#) impeding student learning. It acknowledged that peer effects have a significant impact on student outcomes. It offered no solutions at that time and still doesn’t. It seems in 2025 that it has forgotten that systemic inefficiency, something beyond the level of each school, is something that still gets in the way of productivity.

The subsequent [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#) stated that the current system entrenches educational disadvantage, in the process making it less likely that other reforms will realise Australia’s longstanding ambition of equity and excellence. The implications are clear: proposals for school reform need to be accompanied by steps to address wide structural problems that get in the way. It appears that the authors of the current report had little understanding of such deep-seated barriers to successful reform - or perhaps believed that these could be overcome if suitable incentives, pressure or mandates were placed on schools.

The relevance of this to efforts to improve student achievement and hence school productivity seem clear enough. The investigation [completed by Michele Bruniges](#) earlier in 2025, is a recent confirmation of an increasing concentration of disadvantage in lower SEA schools. Another recent investigation, [The systemic inefficiency of Australian schools: a policy and measurement review](#), adds to our understanding about the links between enrolment segregation and school system productivity. At the very least, it strongly suggests that not enough students, certainly not across the whole range of schools, will benefit from the recommendations in the current interim report. Indeed, if past efforts are any guide, the risk is that its implementation will continue and possibly worsen existing inequalities.

The problems underpinning Australia’s school system/s in part derive from the unlevel playing field of schools, especially those created by unequal obligations and regulations of public and private schools. This is an historical problem, but one underpinning the way schools operate and (most unfairly) compete.

The challenges faced by innovative schools illustrates another problem related to fairness and equity. Big Picture Learning schools, which are mainly (but not only) public schools, have become well-established and are widely respected in the way they restore purpose and a future focus for the students they enrol, largely in areas of distinct socio-economic disadvantage. Not only are students fully supported through school, but they exit with a credential and an assured post-school pathway. Yet these schools are not as well-supported as they could be by governments and bureaucracy for significantly ‘lifting’ the prospects of young people from low SES communities.

There are other programs and schools which serve young people who are not succeeding in mainstream schools. Some programs are attached to schools, but often don't have sufficient ongoing responsibility for student progress and achievement.

An increasing number of Special Assistance Schools have been established over the last 15 years, supported by substantial funding (up to 95%) from the Federal Government. The stated purpose of the Special Assistance Schools (to primarily cater for students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties) seems appropriate, but not much is known about their effectiveness.

A [2023 research report](#) on these schools by Independent Schools Australia set out to provide *"a national picture, data analysis and research on Independent Special Assistance Schools"*. It showcased many schools but provided almost no data or research evidence showing the effectiveness of the schools. It referred to a difficulty in obtaining meaningful data due to the *"very nature of the students, families and communities"*. In considerable contrast, Big Picture Learning Australia has provided [substantial evidence](#) of the effectiveness of its schools and the success of their [students](#).

The total picture is one of duplicated layers of schools, funded in inconsistent ways mainly by two levels of government - but without sufficient accountability and without consistent oversight in areas such as curriculum, assessment and rigorous student exit credentials. The expansion of Special Assistance Schools seems to reflect a lack of overall planning and school provision that does little or nothing for overall system quality, efficiency, effectiveness ... and productivity.

It also illustrates the inadequate policy settings across two levels of government. The federally-funded Special Assistance Schools apparently enrol students rejected by the state-funded mainly government schools, but little is known about which students and the enrolment decisions made by their new school. It would be concerning if the 'rejecting' school was simply offloading problem students. It is additionally concerning if this amounted to cost-shifting by state and territory governments. It is already the case that the latter have sometimes been slow to provide new schools, in anticipation of the savings derived when the Federal Government substantially funds the recurrent cost of running new private schools.

The provision of schools funded by different and inconsistent levels of government somewhat mocks the claim, made in the Productivity Commission's report, that Australia's school architecture *"provides a foundation for further reform."*

### **3. Conclusion**

It is disappointing that the report was put together without any serious effort to understand the potential for schools to 'do school' differently. The report apparently draws on what it learned from consultations, but the most important actors seem not to have been consulted. The word 'students' appears over 80 times in the first section of the report, but not once in the context of any apparent consultation.

At the very least the report needs to be edited and rewritten, in part to take into account deficiencies outlined in this submission.

There is a need for advice and recommendations about technology and AI in schools, but there is no need for these to be shrouded in some belief that Australia's schools represent a standard template into which anything, whether an ephemeral idea or a national priority, should be forced.

Finally, the example of Big Picture Learning schools is illustrative of how there is ample room, and a great need, for authentic reform in how a school can, with demonstrable success, reshape learning and achievement. Big Picture Learning schools are already well down the pathways and processes suggested in the report, and will even go further. But they will do this without abandoning the broad purposes of school education, and especially without abandoning the very students who need help most of all.

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