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Schools in Fire Country

The student showcase

Positioning students as agents of change in their school community



Image: Harkaway Primary School

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Summary

The student learning showcase is a crucial element of the Schools in Fire Country learning model. As the final activity in the learning sequence, the showcase provides an opportunity for students to share their learning with an authentic audience and engage in genuine dialogue with the wider community. In the program trial at Harkaway Primary School, the student learning showcase served to increase student engagement and motivation and provided a valuable form of authentic assessment. It also created a safe environment in which the students and showcase guests could learn from each other and develop a deeper appreciation of the contributions that children can make to bushfire risk management in their households, schools and communities.

This practice brief describes the student learning showcase that was held at the end of the Schools in Fire Country program trial at Harkaway Primary School. It emphasises the importance of student participation in planning and running the event. It also highlights the value of the showcase for student learning and wellbeing, community engagement, and the development of shared understandings. The practice brief concludes with the project team's reflections on how the student learning showcase represents a highly effective mechanism through which schools can promote student agency and school pride.

Read more about the about the Harkaway trial in [Practice Brief 3.](#)



“As we teach our community what to do during a bushfire, we learn more ourselves. But I truly think the best thing we've learned is that Harkaway kids can also make a difference. We're just 11 and 12-year-olds and we made a difference - we told our community what to do during a bushfire and I think that's the best thing that we've all learned.”

- Year 6 student, Harkaway Primary School

Why this matters

The overarching goal of Schools in Fire Country is to position students as genuine participants in bushfire risk management. It seeks to achieve this by providing students with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to identify and solve authentic problems in their own local communities.

The student learning showcase enables students to demonstrate their capacities for identifying and solving problems in a safe and supportive environment. As research shows, this has a powerful impact on adult perceptions of children's roles and can serve to transform the structures and systems that marginalise children from bushfire risk management.



The official invitation to the Harkaway Student Learning showcase.

HARKAWAY BUSHFIRE CONVERSATIONS

The student learning showcase was an important part of the school-based trial at Harkaway Primary School.

Not only did it provide students with an opportunity to share their projects with an authentic audience, but it also provided representatives from the emergency management, education, and research sectors with an opportunity to directly observe the benefits of the Schools in Fire Country approach in a real school community.

Framing the showcase event as 'Harkaway Bushfire Conversations' set the tone for an event that enabled the students, teachers and invited guests to learn from each other through an open exchange of information and ideas.



MAKING PLANS

The idea of hosting a student learning showcase was floated with the Harkaway students at numerous points during the trial, but it was only in the final stages of the *Take Action* phase that the date was set and plans for the event began to take shape.


From the very beginning of the event planning process, the students were encouraged to contribute their ideas and participate in decision-making. As the planning progressed, the students took increasing levels of ownership of the event. Many of the students stepped into leadership roles, taking on responsibility for specific tasks and coordinating and scheduling key activities to help ensure that their event would be a success.

Students were also involved in preparing the guest list, with many of the students inviting the expert who had assisted them with their project. This served to further reinforce the notion that this was *their* event.

FINALISING PROTOTYPES

With the date for the event set and planning well underway, the students had several weeks to prepare their high-fidelity prototypes and think about how they might present them at the showcase. During this period, levels of student enthusiasm and motivation increased markedly.

Many of the students began using free time in class to test and refine their prototypes and some students began working on their projects during lunchtimes and after school. Recognising the students' commitment to their projects, classroom teachers also allocated additional slots in the classroom timetable so that students could present their best work at the showcase.

A photograph showing a student in a blue school uniform sitting at a wooden desk in a classroom, working on a silver laptop. The laptop screen displays a website with text and images. To the right of the laptop, there is a small, intricate prototype made of dried twigs and leaves. In the background, other students are visible at their desks, and a bookshelf is partially seen. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

A student puts the finishing touches on her high-fidelity prototype in preparation for the showcase event.

GETTING ORGANISED

In the weeks leading up to showcase, the classroom teachers and support staff deployed their superior organisational and logistical skills to ensure that everything would be ready on the day. They worked with the students to compile a 'Guest Booklet', which included descriptions of each student project and corresponding QR codes that linked to digital project outputs, such as videos and websites. Teachers also worked with the students to plan the layout of the student project displays, taking into account issues such as noise levels, social distancing, and the overall guest experience.

Most importantly, the teachers managed students' expectations of themselves and the showcase, emphasising that the primary purpose of this event was to bring adults and children together to have conversations about bushfire safety, exchange ideas and learn from each other.

With the showcase only a few days away, the classroom became a hub of activity as students finalised their projects and tweaked their project displays. By this stage of the preparations, levels of student agency and leadership were ascendent. The students made streamers, banners, business cards and posters to brighten up their displays and draw in an audience. They created name badges and costumes to wear on the day. They also designed creative and engaging ways to present their high-fidelity prototypes to the guests.

While most of the students had progressed their projects to a point where they could be presented at the showcase, there was a small number of students who did not feel ready to take that step. However, these students were still very much involved in organising the event and they took on the role of 'concierge and guest services'. They set up a welcome desk at the entry to the building, decorated it with a large banner and streamers, and rehearsed their approach to greeting the guests upon arrival. The students took great pride in this important role which was crucial to managing a successful showcase event.



The *Plan, Planner Planners* show a guest how to play 'Preparing your Property', a video game they created using Scratch, a free programming language. The game teaches people how to create defendable space around their house.



The Pet Rescuers hand out tickets to the premier screening of their pet safety videos: *"We have created a website with links to our videos that teach people how to plan for their pets. We thought that watching videos might make it easier for others to learn and they may remember the information more."*

SHOWCASE DAY ARRIVES


On the morning of the showcase event, the students got to work finalising their project displays and making last minute adjustments to their prototypes. The atmosphere was festive and the students were excited for their guests to arrive.

The event was attended by around 40 guests representing over 12 different organisations, including the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), Parks Victoria, the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience (AIDR), the Victorian Department of Education, CSIRO, City of Casey, Natural Hazards Research Australia, Anglesea Fire Brigade, Berwick Fire Brigade and the Arthurs Creek-Strathewen Fire Education Partnership.

The expertise present in the room that day spanned fire ecology, fuel management, bushfire suppression, building construction and design, community-based bushfire risk management, community-led recovery, research and evaluation, community engagement, education, school emergency management and disaster resilience.

The guests had been provided with a full briefing on the aim and purpose of the showcase in pre-event communications, so when they arrived, they were already aware of the relaxed and conversational nature of the event. Following an official welcome from the school leadership and an Acknowledgment of Country from the students, the event was underway.

Image: Harkaway Primary School



A showcase guest explores a website designed by D&N Solutions: *"We are making a website with bushfire plan information and how to understand the Australian Fire Danger Rating system. We want people to be aware of the importance of being prepared and informed so that they will feel safe and not too scared".*

A SPACE FOR MUTUAL LEARNING

To help get the conversations started, each student project team had developed a list of questions that they wanted to be asked about their learning journey. The questions were displayed alongside the students' prototypes and they served as a helpful icebreaker. While the conversations between students and guests naturally veered off in all manner of directions, developing their lists of questions provided students with a strong sense that they had important knowledge and experiences to share.

As the guests moved around the student displays, they engaged with the students' prototypes, asking questions, providing expert advice, and sharing stories of their own experiences in bushfire risk management. Most importantly, they tuned into the students' interests, concerns and hopes for the future.

For the students, engaging in these relaxed conversations and discussions with such a diverse group of interested and supportive experts, enabled them to further extend their learning and broaden their perspectives in personally meaningful ways.

For the guests, the showcase provided an opportunity to directly observe the positive outcomes of a bushfire education program that positions students as genuine participants in community bushfire safety.

The *Leafy Lies* use their diorama to teach a showcase guest about the importance of Aboriginal cultural burning: *"We have designed and created a diorama to show the before and after effects of cultural burning. We want people to learn how cultural burning helps manage bushfires."*



ENGAGING IN AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

The student showcase also represented a valuable form of authentic student assessment because it provided the students with an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in a real-world context that was relevant and meaningful.

Presenting their projects to the showcase guests required the students to describe their chosen problem and demonstrate how their solution would solve that problem in their own local context. Combined with the task of displaying their solutions in creative and engaging ways, this not only enabled an assessment of students' mastery of content knowledge, but also their critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, and literacy and communication skills.

The *Bubbly Boxes* display their website and showcase merchandise:

"We have made a website to teach kids (and adults) about bushfire boxes and bags. Our aim is to help people be prepared in case of a bushfire. We decided to present our learning as a website as we really enjoy making them and we thought it would be really engaging for our target audience."



The *Ember Attack Attackers* show a bushfire scientist the videos they have produced: “We are creating a website with videos on it in order to teach others of the dangers of ember attacks so that people are better prepared in the bushfire season.”



Images: Harkaway Primary School



Showcase guests watch a film created by the *Fire Fuel Load Clearers*: “We decided to create a funny video about how to keep your house nice and clean so that if a bushfire comes you are prepared. We chose to share the information this way so that kids would want to watch and not get bored. Our goal is to teach kids so that they can teach their families.”

Reflections from the project team

The 'Harkaway Bushfire Conversations' event clearly demonstrated that the student learning showcase is an essential component of the *Schools in Fire Country* teaching and learning model. The opportunity to share their learning with an authentic audience of invited guests was a powerful motivator for the students as they finalised their projects and the event itself gave them a strong sense of their own capacities as agents for change in bushfire risk management.

The showcase also provided an opportunity for representatives from across the emergency management sector to engage in genuine dialogue with the students and gain a deeper understanding of their knowledge, perspectives and experiences. Meanwhile, the school's approach to planning and organising the showcase event meant that every student could participate in a way that felt safe, meaningful and worthwhile. For a program built on principles of participation and inclusion, this was critically important.

In the context of the Harkaway trial, the showcase provided an opportunity to celebrate the collaborative efforts to develop, test and refine a place-based, participatory bushfire education program for year 5/6 students. It also provided an opportunity for partner agencies involved in the program's development to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning model and observe the benefits of that model first-hand. In other schools, the nature of the event and the composition of guests will be determined by goals and priorities of the school community.

As we observed at Harkaway, teachers are well-practiced in hosting showcase events, and they are highly skilled in making sure those events centre the learning and wellbeing needs of students. As such, the form and function of the *Schools in Fire Country* student learning showcase will vary from school to school. As long as the event creates an environment in which students and guests can engage in genuine dialogue and learn from each other, positive outcomes can be achieved.

This practice brief is the fourth in a series of five that chronicle the development of *Schools in Fire Country* - a research-informed bushfire education program for upper primary school students in Victoria, Australia.

The program was developed through a multi-agency, cross-sector collaborative partnership with funding support from Country Fire Authority (CFA), The Victorian State Government Safer Together program, and Natural Hazards Research Australia.

The program has received federal funding until 2027 from the National Emergency Management Agency to continue the development of sustainable partnerships, processes and resources and continuously adapt to the needs of schools, students, fire agencies and communities.

The complete series of practice briefs and other information about the program can be accessed [here](#).

For all program enquires [click here](#).

Endnote

1. CFA. (2023). *Harkaway Primary School awarded for fire safety program*. CFA News: East Burwood. Available [here](#)