

APRIL 2025

## Schools in Fire Country

# Making new connections The Chewton trial



*Image: Chewton Primary School*

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## Summary

Through the adoption of a collaborative and iterative human-centred design process, the Schools in Fire Country project developed a program framework that centres the needs and priorities of students, educators, and fire managers. While an initial trial at Harkaway Primary School provided support for the desirability, feasibility and viability of this framework, issues surrounding scalability and sustainability required further investigation. An additional trial at Chewton Primary School provided further opportunities for mutual learning which informed additional refinements to the program framework.

This practice brief describes the process and outcomes of a school-based trial of Schools in Fire Country at Chewton Primary School. It highlights the importance of local relationships and partnerships for successful implementation and emphasises the program's value in relation to student learning and community connectedness. The practice brief concludes with practitioner reflections on the Chewton trial and what has been learned from the experience.

*“Looking at the Schools in Fire Country unit plan, I knew straight away that it would work. We will now include it every second year in our inquiry cycle. It's too important not to include this material.”*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*



## Why this matters

The Chewton trial of Schools in Fire Country was the first real-world application of the program outside of the initial trial at Harkaway. The Chewton trial took place in Term 1 2023, with classroom teachers adapting the program to suit their specific needs, fire management agencies providing localised support and the project team playing an advisory but mostly observatory role. This represented a valuable learning experience and a significant first step towards expansion into more Victorian primary schools.



### BUILDING ON LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS

A key element of the Schools in Fire Country program framework is its collaborative implementation strategy. Underpinned by an ethos of shared responsibility, this strategy recognises the importance of local connections and relationships that enable schools and fire agencies to work together to achieve shared goals and objectives.

The trial at Chewton Primary School arose through an existing connection between the school Principal and the local Safer Together Community-Based Bushfire Management (CBBM) facilitator. Positioned in regional areas across Victoria, CBBM facilitators work with specific communities to enable place-based learning and community-centred decision-making to manage local bushfire risks. The CBBM facilitator was aware that Schools in Fire Country was under development and engaged the school in a discussion about being involved in a trial. The school was interested, and the project team was invited to discuss the program with members of the school staff, a parents group representative and the local CFA.

The project team then made an in-person visit to walk the classroom teacher through the project-based learning model and the supporting teaching and learning resources. The teacher was then able to take those resources and adapt them to the local context before using them with their year 5/6 class. Equipped with well-designed, curriculum-aligned resources and back up support from the local brigade, CBBM facilitator and the project team, the classroom teacher felt confident to implement.

*"I met with the project team to learn about the unit. It was a great meeting and I walked away inspired and excited to get started. The unit is very easy to follow and implement."*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*

## THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

The Chewton trial commenced with the classroom teacher implementing the **Discover** phase as an inquiry learning unit. The school's teaching and learning plan for the year 5/6 students includes one inquiry unit per term, so this worked well in the context of their existing priorities and approaches.

In addition to addressing the curriculum content specified in the Discover scope and sequence (i.e. Geography, Science, History), the classroom teacher identified additional points of alignment, particularly in the English curriculum. For example, numerous teaching and learning activities in the Discover modules were utilised as opportunities to focus on reading and writing skills, with students interpreting, analysing, evaluating texts and recording their reflections in learning journals.

During the Discover phase, the classroom teacher also incorporated poetry writing, painting and drawing, which not only fostered students' creativity and self-expression but addressed additional curriculum content in English and Visual Art. This also provided an opportunity for the school's specialist art teacher to collaborate with the classroom teacher and work directly with the students to develop their conceptual and technical skills.





*"The combined poetry and art unit allowed the students to express their ideas and explore fears and concepts around fire. The students were able to draw on their prior learning of the fire cycle to support the written work and visual responses."*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*

*Image: Chewton Primary School*



Fire themed artwork created during the Discover phase.



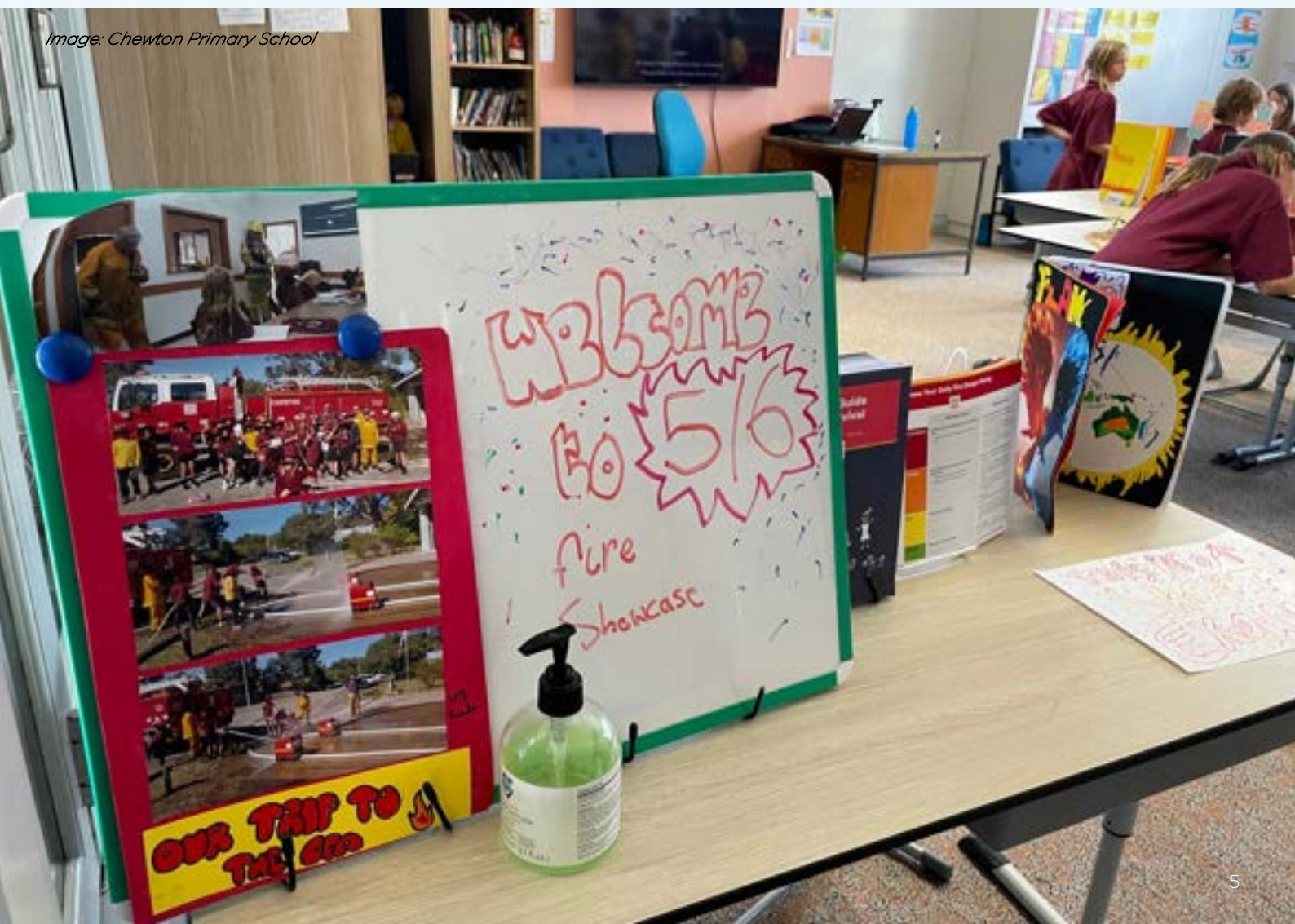
The **Investigate** and **Take Action** phases of the program were implemented as a project-based learning unit. Throughout these phases, the classroom teacher collaborated with the school's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) teacher, which ensured that the students could access specialist technical advice, guidance and support as they tackled their projects.

The students revelled in the opportunity to develop creative solutions to authentic local problems. Their projects addressed a wide range of important issues in their community and resulted in the development of videos, websites, games, dioramas and risk communication tools. One of the students developed an Australian Fire Danger Rating System board and volunteered to keep the students updated on the fire danger ratings. Another student prepared a diorama of a well-prepared property and a poorly prepared property with the intention of highlighting what residents need to do before and during bushfire season. One group of students even designed a fire safe school uniform, with particular thought given to non-flammable fabrication and high visibility.

*"Having the support of the local CFA was fantastic. The students really felt part of something bigger than just the classroom. Our local brigade members were very enthusiastic with great resources to inspire and engage the students in their learning".*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*

Image: Chewton Primary School





As the students worked their way through the program, the guidance and advice of local experts was never far away. Over the course of the term, the school was supported by the local CFA Brigade's Community Safety Coordinator, the local CBBM Facilitator, and the CFA Regional Service Delivery Coordinator. The CFA Brigade Community Safety Coordinator was instrumental in supporting students with classroom visits and an excursion to the local fire station, and district and regional CFA staff assisted with the arrangement of a Fire Behaviour Table demonstration.

According to the teachers, the involvement of experts was a big motivator for the students and gave them a strong sense of purpose in their learning. The involvement of experts was an important source of support for teachers too, once again highlighting the importance of the program's collaborative implementation strategy.

At the end of the school term, after ten weeks of meaningful and purposeful integrated learning, the students proudly presented their projects at a showcase event attended by younger students, parents, local brigade members, district and regional CFA staff, other local emergency services and council employees. Reflecting on the showcase event, the classroom teacher emphasised its value and significance for the students, their parents and the whole school community.

*"The final showcase was a huge success. Parents came in and shared in the students learning. It was student led and most parents got a sense of how much learning took place during the term. Both parents and students were proud of their achievements and and school pride grew from the experience"*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*



Students prepare for the inaugural Chewton Primary School Fire Showcase.

## PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Reflecting on the outcomes of the program, the classroom teacher emphasised the value of the program for the students in relation to their knowledge, skills and sense of empowerment.

*"I've no doubt they're much more skilled and empowered with knowledge about bushfire...the more we understand, the more knowledge we gain, we can ease some of that fear and anxiety."*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*

The classroom teacher also highlighted that the program had addressed a significant portion of the curriculum across a broad range of key learning areas, indicating that it was a highly beneficial use of valuable classroom time.

*"It covered loads of curriculum. There was reading, writing, science, maths, geography, Indigenous perspectives, sustainability, art, digital technology. And we could have covered more!"*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*

From the classroom teacher's perspective, one of the most valuable program outcomes was an increased level of connectedness between the school, the parents and the local emergency services. The many challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic had made it difficult for the school to maintain its previously strong connections with the local CFA and the broader school community, but Schools in Fire Country had helped to reestablish those connections.

*"We've always had a strong connection with CFA, but we've not had anyone in the school since COVID. We've had less connection to the community and parents. But since the showcase and having the program here, it's building that momentum. I'd say the CFA is a big part of our community and it's great to have them back...And certainly the kids would go home and talk about the program with their parents."*

*- Teacher, Chewton Primary School*



Members of the local CFA brigade who had supported the students throughout the program also noted the increased level of connectedness, especially between the students and the brigade.

*"Kids asked me how old they needed to be to join [the local brigade]. The kids were interested. The first lieutenant was surprised to see how many notes the kids were taking. There was a real seriousness about how they approached this project, of which the station visit was just a minor part."*

*- Local CFA Brigade member*



## REFLECTIONS FROM THE PROJECT TEAM

The Chewton trial indicated that the Schools in Fire Country program model can be successfully implemented by teachers with appropriate support from the fire agency staff and volunteers at the local and district level. Not only did the program enable teachers to cover many key areas of the Victorian curriculum in a meaningful and engaging way, but it also helped to re-establish the relationship between the school, parents and the local emergency services following the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this positive experience, the school is now planning to incorporate the program into the teaching and learning cycle and implement it with the year 5/6 class every two years.

For the Schools in Fire Country project team, the Chewton trial demonstrated that the program can be picked up and adapted by teachers to meet their own teaching and learning goals and priorities. It also demonstrated that the effectiveness of the program is enhanced when teachers apply their own professional expertise and collaborate with their colleagues to implement integrated cross-curricular learning activities. Finally, the trial highlighted the important role that Safer Together CBBM Facilitators and other locally connected practitioners can play as advocates and supporters of the program. With their relationship-building and community development expertise, these practitioners can facilitate valuable place-based connections and bolster the efforts of school communities in high bushfire risk locations across Victoria.

This practice brief is the last 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](#).