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Schools in Fire Country

A research-informed approach to bushfire education for Victorian primary schools



Image: Harkaway Primary School

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Energy,
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and Climate Action



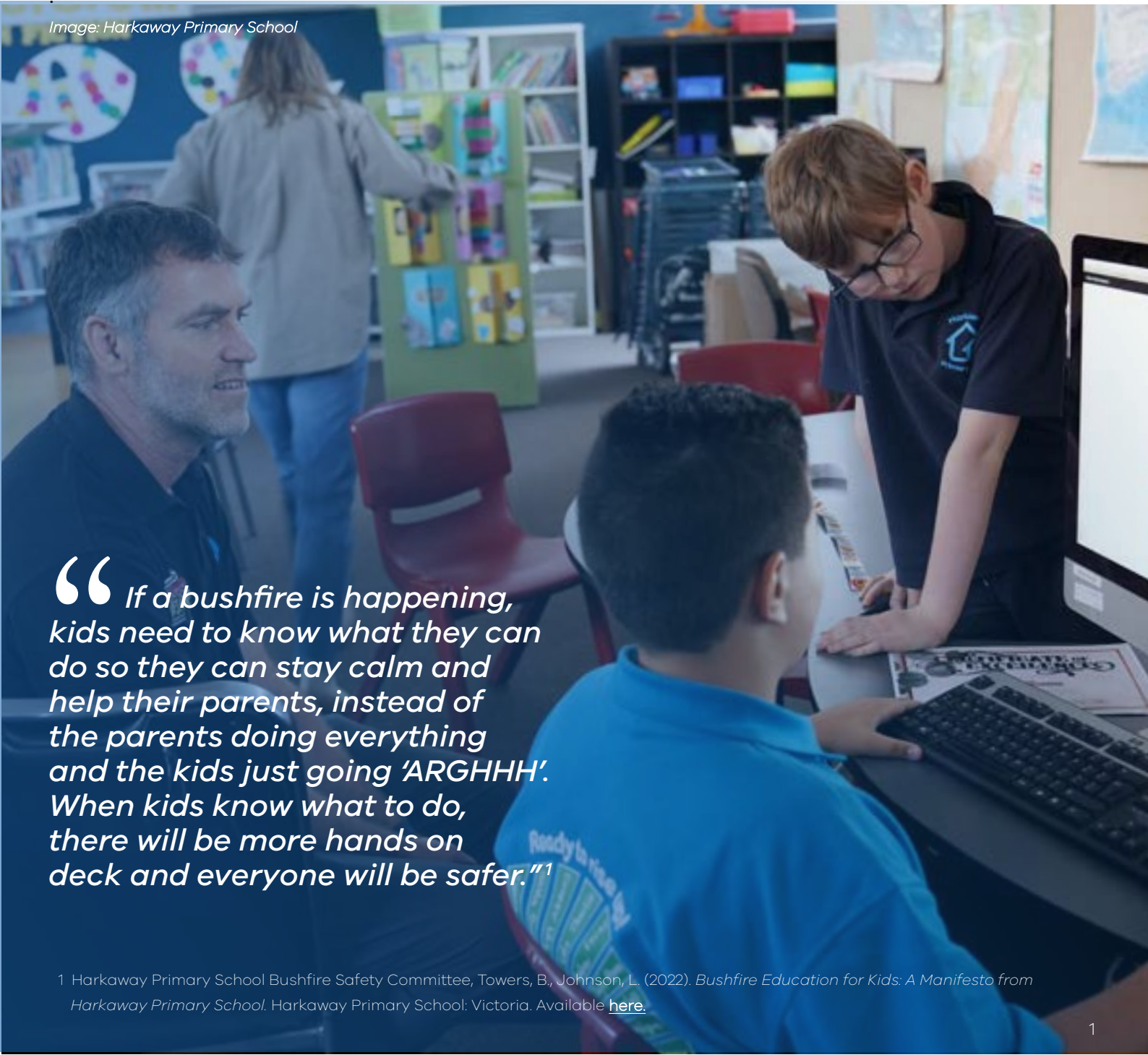
Natural
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Summary

Schools in Fire Country is a place-based, participatory, curriculum-aligned bushfire education program for Victorian upper primary school students. Built on evidence-based approaches and multi-agency, cross-sector collaborative partnerships, the program empowers students with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to navigate the complexities of bushfire risk management in their households, schools and communities.

In this series of five Practice Briefs, the Schools in Fire Country project team introduce the program framework and define the research-informed good practice principles that underpin it. They also describe the human-centred design methodology that guided program development and the school-based trials that informed program modifications and improvements. Taken together, the five practice briefs provide a blueprint for the development of good-practice disaster resilience education programs that empower children as agents of change in their communities.

Image: Harkaway Primary School



“If a bushfire is happening, kids need to know what they can do so they can stay calm and help their parents, instead of the parents doing everything and the kids just going ‘ARGHHH’. When kids know what to do, there will be more hands on deck and everyone will be safer.”¹

¹ Harkaway Primary School Bushfire Safety Committee, Towers, B., Johnson, L. (2022). *Bushfire Education for Kids: A Manifesto from Harkaway Primary School*. Harkaway Primary School: Victoria. Available [here](#).

Why this matters

The importance of school-based bushfire education for Australian children has been recognised in Royal Commissions and public inquiries for over 80 years. Despite this, the topic of bushfire was only incorporated into the national curriculum in 2014, when 'the impacts of bushfires or floods on environments and communities and how people can respond' was added to year 5 Geography.

With the inclusion of bushfire in the formal curriculum, state and territory fire agencies set about producing a range of educational programs and resources to support curriculum implementation in schools. However, research evidence that could inform the development of those programs and resources was lacking.

By identifying and developing good practice models and approaches, the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC research project on Child-Centred Disaster Risk Reduction sought to address that gap.

Background

A key objective of the Bushfire Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) project on **Child-Centred Disaster Risk Reduction**, which ran from 2015 to 2020, was to provide state and territory fire agencies with an evidence-base that could inform the development of effective, scalable and sustainable school-based bushfire education.

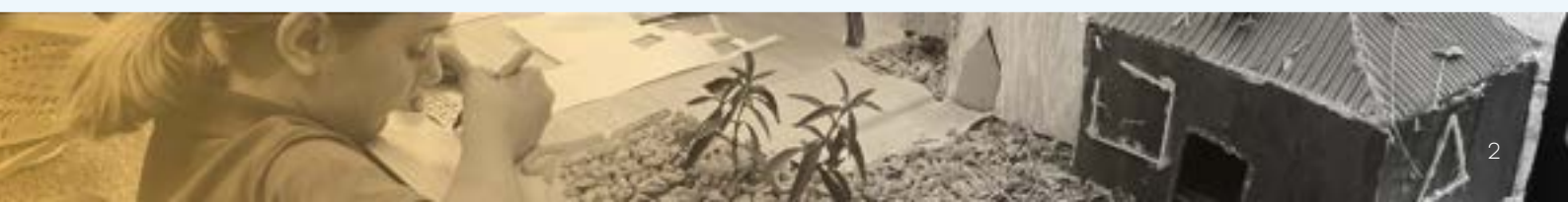
Through extensive research conducted in collaboration with agencies, schools, and students themselves, the CRC research team was able to identify a set of good practice principles that can guide the design and implementation of programs and resources.

(Read more about the good practice principles in **Practice Brief 2.**)

When Natural Hazards Research Australia was established in 2020, a partnership with the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victorian Government **Safer Together** program (a joint agency initiative comprising CFA and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action [DEECA]) was extended to develop and test a good practice school-based bushfire education program for upper primary school students.

Over a period of two years, a multi-agency, cross-sector, interdisciplinary project team employed a human-centred design methodology which put the needs and priorities of educators, fire managers and students at the heart of program development. This highly collaborative and iterative process resulted in the creation of Schools in Fire Country.

(Learn more about this research utilisation project **here.**)



The Schools in Fire Country program framework

The Schools in Fire Country program framework includes five core elements:

1. An authentic project-based learning model
2. Curriculum-aligned teaching and learning resources
3. A collaborative implementation strategy
4. Learning opportunities for teachers and community partners
5. Monitoring, evaluation and research for continuous improvement



1. AN AUTHENTIC PROJECT-BASED LEARNING MODEL

Schools in Fire Country uses a project-based learning model that enables students to identify and solve authentic problems in their local community. In this model, student learning is scaffolded across three main phases: Discover, Investigate and Take Action. As students move through these phases, they are encouraged to exercise their agency as learners and citizens who can make a valuable contribution to bushfire community safety.

Watch an introductory video about the program's authentic project-based learning model [here](#).



Discover

The teacher uses a series of powerful provocations to tune into students' existing knowledge, thoughts and feelings about bushfire. Students then embark on a cross-curricular exploration of key topics including fire ecology, Aboriginal cultural burning, bushfire behaviour in the landscape and bushfire risk. These activities establish a solid foundation for authentic learning and informed action as students progress through the program.

[Watch video](#)



Investigate

Students draw on the knowledge, skills and understandings they developed in the Discover phase to identify authentic problems in their local community. Students then choose one relevant problem of particular interest or concern to study in more detail. Through focused inquiry and engagement with their wider school community, students develop a deeper understanding of their chosen problem from the perspectives of local people.

[Watch video](#)



Take Action

Students generate a multitude of ideas for possible solutions to their chosen problem and select the best idea to develop into a low-fidelity prototype. Students then test their prototypes with subject matter experts and target users and refine them based on the feedback they receive. The students then create high-fidelity prototypes of their solutions and share them with their school community at a showcase event.

[Watch video](#)

2. CURRICULUM-ALIGNED TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES

Implementation of each phase in the project-based learning model is supported by a comprehensive suite of place-based teaching and learning resources that directly address learning outcomes and achievement standards for key learning areas and capabilities in the Victorian curriculum for years 5 and 6.

Through a cross-curricular approach that integrates the Humanities, Science, English, Critical and Creative Thinking, and Personal and Social Capability, students develop a holistic understanding of the bushfire hazards and risks that exist in their own local context.



Image: Chewton Primary School

3. A COLLABORATIVE IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

A central component of the Schools in Fire Country program framework is a collaborative implementation strategy that is underpinned by an ethos of shared responsibility². This strategy recognises that the sustained delivery of an authentic project-based learning model requires the education and bushfire management sectors to work together in ways that utilise their respective capabilities, resources, and areas of expertise.

At the local level, this involves fire brigades and other community partners contributing their local knowledge, wisdom, and experience at key points during the program to enhance the student learning experience. This collaborative, place-based approach enhances community connections and results in shared learning and mutually beneficial outcomes for students, schools, families, communities and agencies.

² Emergency Management Victoria. (2022). *Victorian Preparedness Framework*. Victorian Government, Melbourne.

4. LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Schools in Fire Country has been designed to utilise the expertise and resources that already exist in schools, local brigades and the wider community. However, the place-based, participatory approaches to bushfire education that define this program will represent new terrain for many teachers, brigade members and other community partners.

While most Victorian teachers would be well-acquainted with project-based learning, the provision of professional learning opportunities that support them to apply this methodology to the topic of bushfire safety will be crucial to the program's success.

Capability building activities that enable local brigades and community partners to effectively support teachers and students will also be essential.

At present, the program provides a suite of teaching and learning resources and a series of introductory videos, complemented by experiential coaching and mentoring activities. As the program continues to grow and evolve, these resources will be enhanced through more formal training courses and professional learning opportunities.

5. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND RESEARCH FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Schools in Fire Country program has been informed by over ten years of research-based evidence and evidence-based practice. As the program is adopted in more schools across Victoria, ongoing monitoring, evaluation and research will support the continuous improvement of the program framework and its constituent elements.

As part of the program development process a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and learning system has been designed. This system, which uses program theory to identify intended outcomes and likely change pathways, will generate new knowledge and insights that will be used to enhance the program and inform future engagements with schools and local communities.

This practice brief is the first 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](#).