

Learning to love where we live again: Strathewen-Arthurs Creek Bushfire Education Partnership

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The Strathewen-Arthurs Creek Bushfire Education Partnership came to life following devastating bushfires in February 2009.

The community of Strathewen in Victoria was devastated by bushfire in February 2009. Many homes were gone, properties were damaged, the local school and hall were destroyed and many family members, friends and neighbours were lost.

After 20 months of operating from a site 20 km away, the local school reopened in October 2010. In the years following the Black Saturday bushfires, the students of Strathewen Primary School, their families and many members of the local community experienced heightened anxiety and distress as the fire season approached each summer.

Given the incredible impact of the firestorm, householders dealt with the effects of trauma, grief and loss and students presented us with many challenges. Our little school had a major role to play in community recovery. There was a great deal of distress and fear in our young people and we worked hard to make sure that school was a safe and calm place.

As a small staff team, we explored and implemented a range of wellbeing projects and each year we carefully addressed the issue of bushfire preparedness and response at school and home, but there was a need to do more. The difficulty we faced was in identifying a program that would meet our specific needs. We wanted to focus on the future; building resilience in our young people and equipping them with essential skills, and the knowledge, to manage life in a high-fire-risk area.

The Strathewen-Arthurs Creek Bushfire Education Partnership started to come to life when local Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteer, Lisal O'Brien and Anglesea's Jamie McKenzie (the driving force behind the CFA Survive and Thrive Pilot Program) began discussions with me, as Strathewen's teaching principal. The pilot program had been successfully implemented at Anglesea Primary School by Jamie and the CFA's Emma Taunt and it seemed like the perfect fit for Strathewen.



Community Helpers Day involves students, members of the community, CFA volunteers, local police and others to work on projects.

Image: Jane Hayward

External funding was successfully sought through Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal and the local Strathewen Bushfire Relief Trust. In late 2015, the planning began in earnest. With the support of Survive and Thrive, a program was created to specifically meet our needs. The main focus was community recovery, reducing distress, building resilience within our student group and empowering our young people with knowledge. Our aim from the outset was to support our children as they learnt to love where they lived once again.

The Strathewen-Arthurs Creek Bushfire Education Partnership commenced in 2016. We are now into the third year of program implementation, which sees the grade 5 and 6 cohort each year involved in a wide range of fire-education sessions on Tuesday mornings during terms 2 and 3. Students become junior members of the local CFA and proudly wear their special uniform to school for all sessions. They work with an incredible host



Children from Years 5 and 6 benefit from fire-education activities every week at the school.

Image: Jane Hayward

of experts, both local and from further afield, and are immersed in rich learning experiences.

Investigating fire behaviour, students look closely at where they live and the subsequent bushfire risk. In weekly sessions they learn about the bush, in very hands-on sessions. They study map reading, topography and learn to measure fuel loading. They work on understanding the Fire Danger Rating system and learn to use tools to determine how the rating is calculated. They explore the responsibility of local bushfire preparedness and planning.

We now have 11 and 12 year olds confidently understanding and using complex scientific equipment and keenly stepping up to instruct adults as they share their knowledge. Student engagement in the program has been amazing. We have witnessed growing family and community interest and participation in all that we do. The wider community and emergency services are involved, participating in 'community helper' days, working with students on a range of projects, sharing knowledge and attending presentation events. The communities of Strathewen and Arthurs Creek have formed strong, new connections as a direct result of the program.

During the past three years, students have worked alongside and formed relationships with CFA volunteers and staff and a host of experts in the emergency management field. They proudly and confidently share their projects and information at every opportunity, delivering presentations to other schools and audiences near and far. They're passionate about sharing what they know.

Our students have created a claymation movie and a picture story book to share information on bushfire



The hands-on sessions help students understand fuel loading and fire danger rating.

Image: Jane Hayward

preparedness and understanding the Fire Danger Rating system in Victoria. These resources are now being used in many school settings as teaching tools. The direction the project takes each year is largely driven by the students, providing them with a real voice and a true sense of ownership.

The outcomes of the program to date have far exceeded expectations. In addition to the strength of the learning outcomes, which relate directly to curriculum, the effects of the Partnership Project have been incredibly positive. Parents and teachers have clearly noted a reduction in stress and anxiety related behaviours and a new sense of confidence and calm in our young people as the fire season approaches. There is a shared understanding within the school community of our responsibility in living where we do.

At a school level, we have moved forward. Not so long ago, all bushfire-related discussion was approached cautiously due to student and community sensitivity. Today we have information on bushfire preparedness addressed regularly in school newsletters. Almost weekly, we're publishing updates and articles written by students to communicate their learning. Empowering our students with knowledge has built confidence and resilience across the senior student cohort and this is filtering down to younger students who take great interest in what is going on.

We're all very proud of what is being achieved in our little school. The Arthurs Creek-Strathewen Bushfire Education Partnership is an outstanding program model and an example of a community working together to support resilience education.