

Project Firestorm: a student, teacher and NSW RFS collaboration

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St Ives North Public School, Sydney, developed Project Firestorm with quality educational challenges and in collaboration with the local Rural Fire Brigade to increase resilience.

The NSW Geography Syllabus requires Year 5 and Year 6 students to explore the impact of a bushfire on people, places and the environment. St Ives North Public School created Project Firestorm to address the educational goals of the Geography Syllabus while incorporating the STEM subjects of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Project Firestorm ran for 12 weeks, involving 200 students across eight classrooms who created 65 group projects. The school designed a unit of study that encouraged scientific and mathematical thinking alongside critical and creative thinking.

Students focused on a real-life and authentic local problem, with the 'driving question' being: How can the community of St Ives North Public School prepare for, survive and recover from a catastrophic bushfire?

The inquiry learning approach applied at the school highlighted the capacity and capability for young people to rigorously investigate the effects of bushfires on people and places, identify problems and issues as well as propose solutions.

Students learnt about the physical and emotional effects of bushfires using research, listening to podcasts and personal stories as well as experiences shared by the NSW Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS) staff and volunteers. The students transferred this empathetic knowledge into the design of solutions for their community.

The students took the project to heights and extents that we could not have foreseen. Teachers 'let go of the curriculum' and allowed the students to lead the learning. Students reviewed their own practice, set their own milestones and applied critical and creative thinking. Classroom interactions were focused and engagement was very high.

Real and authentic links have been created with the NSW RFS, especially with volunteers from the local Ku-Ring-Gai Brigade. The NSW RFS became learning partners with the students and, importantly, they provided a critical and supportive audience where students felt their ideas were valued and their solutions were viable. The

NSW RFS staff and volunteers shared their expertise in bushfire management, their stories about what it was like to be in a bushfire and shared current and accurate data about the impact on communities of bushfires.

Project Firestorm was conducted in classrooms, led by teachers. The project was supported by NSW RFS at four points:

- A discussion with teachers to finalise the key inquiry questions and to how NSW RFS experts could support the project.
- A single one-hour bushfire overview session for the student cohort (eight classes) as a lead-in to the unit of work.
- About five weeks in to the project, a NSW RFS expert visited each of the eight classes to hear from students on the progress of their group work.
- An end-of-Unit showcase where students presented and described their work to the whole school, parents and community members, as well as to the NSW RFS.

This collaboration addressed two key enablers of scaled implementation of effective disaster resilience education in the classroom: increasing teacher understanding and knowledge of emergencies and disasters; and having a close relationship with emergency services organisations.

Evidence-based practice in disaster resilience education highlights that the best role for emergency services staff when working with students is to support teachers. Project Firestorm allowed the NSW RFS to better understand the value of inquiry learning and the strong connection that can be made to support teacher-led education about bush fires.

NSW RFS staff and volunteers are subject matter experts and can guide students to examine problems as well as reflect on and refine solutions. The participation of the NSW RFS certainly enhanced the educational outcomes for students.