ETHICS BY DESIGN

LEADING NEW FUTURES

2025-2026 PILOT EVALUATION

APRIL 2026

DESIGNED AND DELIVERED WITH

MENZIES LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

THE ETHICS CENTRE

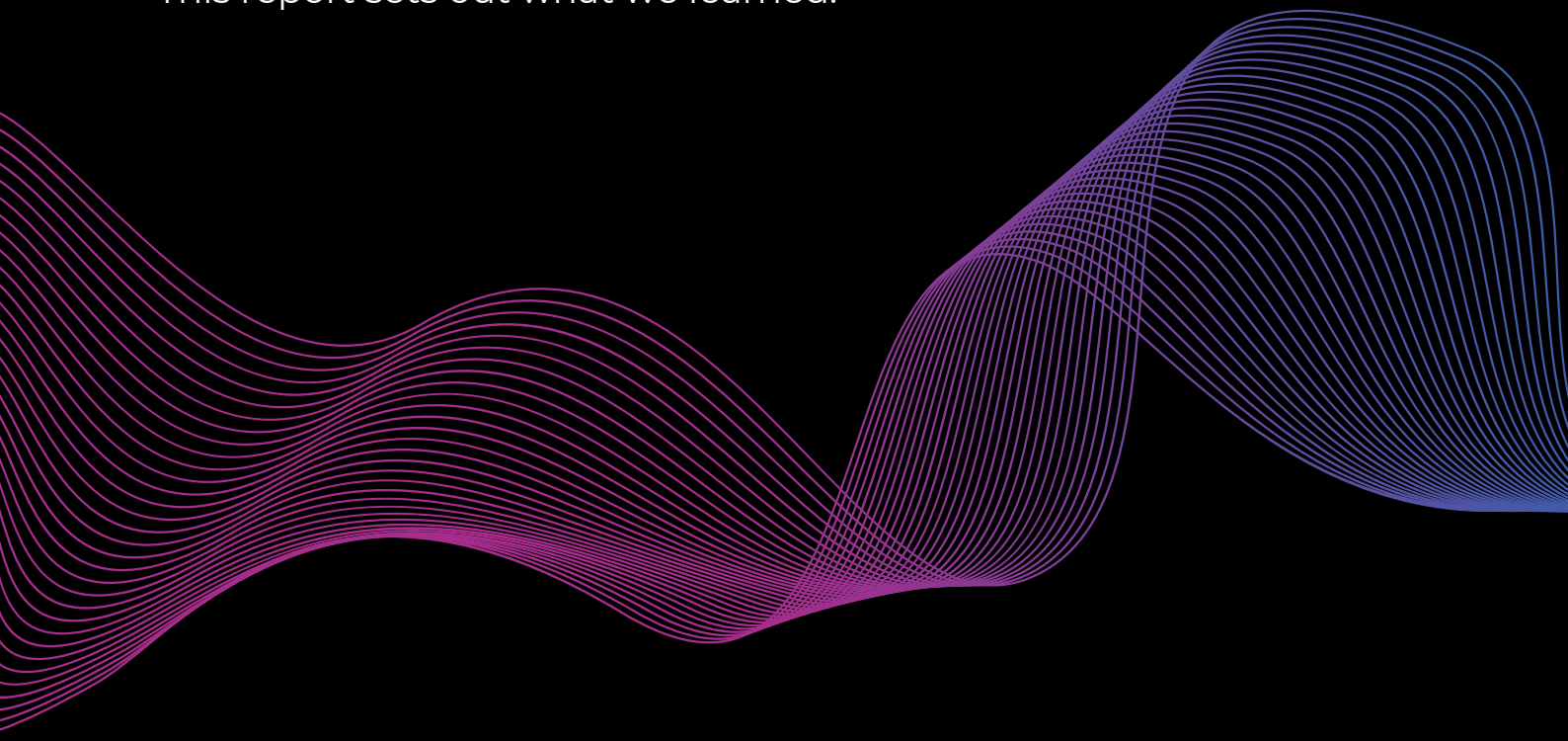
Overview

Australia is asking a lot of the next generation. Climate change, artificial intelligence, polarisation, declining trust in public institutions: today's secondary school students will make decisions most adults find difficult. They are already making them, in classrooms and group chats, about what they believe, what they'll say, and what they'll do when others expect them to follow.

Ethics by Design was built on a simple premise: ethical capability is not innate, and it is not taught by osmosis. It can be taught deliberately and early, as part of how Australian young people are prepared to lead.

Since the program’s inception, the Menzies Leadership Foundation and The Ethics Centre have held the vision that ethical reasoning, systems thinking, and the attributes of self-awareness, courage, curiosity and imagination are at the heart of Australian leadership development. The 2025-2026 pilot is a test of that vision in practice.

This report sets out what we learned.



What we *Set Out* To Test

Smart digital solutions designed to help ideas grow, teams move faster, and businesses scale efficiently.

The 2025-2026 pilot was designed to answer three questions

01 **First:** Can the capabilities at the heart of ethical leadership, reasoning clearly, regulating emotion under pressure, engaging constructively with disagreement, seeing systems rather than just symptoms, actually be taught to secondary school students in a structured, curriculum-compatible way?

02 **Second:** Does the Ethics by Design curriculum, as designed, produce meaningful change?

03 **Third:** What does it take to deliver ethics education inside the real constraints of Australian secondary schools, where teacher time is scarce, timetable space is contested, and ethics is rarely anyone's dedicated curriculum responsibility?

These are related questions, but they are not the same. A pilot can show that content works and still reveal that the delivery model needs rethinking. That is what this one did.

Inside The Program

Ethics by Design is The Ethics Centre's flagship youth leadership initiative, developed and delivered in partnership with the Menzies Leadership Foundation.

It is an 11-hour curriculum for Year 10 students, integrating ethical reasoning, design thinking, and systems thinking. It comprises seven core lessons, two collaborative design labs, and the Design Out Racism Prize Challenge, in which students apply what they have learned to produce advocacy content for a national audience. The capstone carries a $20,000 prize pool across winning schools.

The curriculum is built around the practical tools of ethical thinking, using engaging and challenging activities, such as the Veil of Ignorance and the Five Whys along with structured ethical lenses, deployed through reflective discussion, collaborative inquiry, and application to dilemmas students practically encounter. Lessons are designed to fit within a standard 50–55-minute period, and the program maps to both ACARA General Capabilities and NSW NESA outcomes, so teachers don't have to choose between the program and their existing curriculum obligations.

In 2025, the program was delivered to 295 students across seven NSW schools, spanning government, independent, and faith-based settings, in metropolitan Sydney and regional New South Wales.

What *Students* Told Us

The clearest evidence of impact comes from students themselves, describing what shifted in how they think about ethics, systems, and their own capacity to act.

01 *They came to see ethics as something you can actually do*

“Before this program, I thought that ethics and morals were the same thing, but now I think that ethics is more to do with the decisions we make about others.”

“Before this program, I thought that ethics was just your own right and wrong, but now I think that it is a methodical thing that can be solved with theory.”

“I thought ethics was trivial, but now I think it is practical.”

02 *They began to see systems, not just incidents*

““This program made it clear that those issues stem from greater root causes, such as the culture of a school. It’s not just one individual who says a slur, it’s the parents who make it feel acceptable.”

“My thinking has changed as I look deeper into why things happen, the five whys.”

“The most important thing I learnt was how to think systemically rather than through visceral reaction.”

03 *They moved from resignation to agency*

“Before this program, I thought that racism was too big an issue for small groups of students to try to solve, but now I know that even small contributions can make a big difference.”

“Before this program, I thought casual racism was ok because it didn’t hurt anyone, but now I think that it definitely does.”

04 *They paused and reflected before acting*

"I now stop before blurting out a rash opinion and ask myself if I should be thinking this way or not." “Before this program, I thought casual racism was ok because it didn’t hurt anyone, but now I think that it definitely does.”

"With decisions I would do whatever I wanted in the moment but now I actually think more before I do things."

These are not vague endorsements. They describe specific shifts in the architecture of how these young people approach moral questions, from reactive to reflective, from individual to structural, from resigned to agentic. That is the change the program is designed to produce.

What Teachers *Told Us*

Teachers across the seven pilot schools independently corroborated what students reported. Their observations matter not just because they witnessed the learning, but because they hold a view of what typically happens in a Year 10 classroom, and where this differed.

"When students had to think about small but specific examples of racism that they have viewed or experienced in their own lives... I did see an increased level of insight when they were forced to dig deeper to really get to the root cause of the issue."

"The content is fantastic — I think this program should be compulsory for all Year 10 students. The activities are well designed, and the sequencing is excellent."

"Systems thinking prompted them to consider, in a more nuanced way, the complexities and patterns that overlap to create large social issues."

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What *Measure Suggest*

Alongside the qualitative evidence, the pilot included pre-post student surveys to assess change across ten behavioural and cognitive measures. Twelve students submitted complete pre- and post-program surveys, a matched-pair sample adequate for preliminary indication, but not for confirmation. These results should therefore be read as consistent with the qualitative evidence, not as standalone proof.

38.9%

improvement in students' self-reported capacity to stay calm and think clearly under pressure

WITHIN THAT SAMPLE:

01

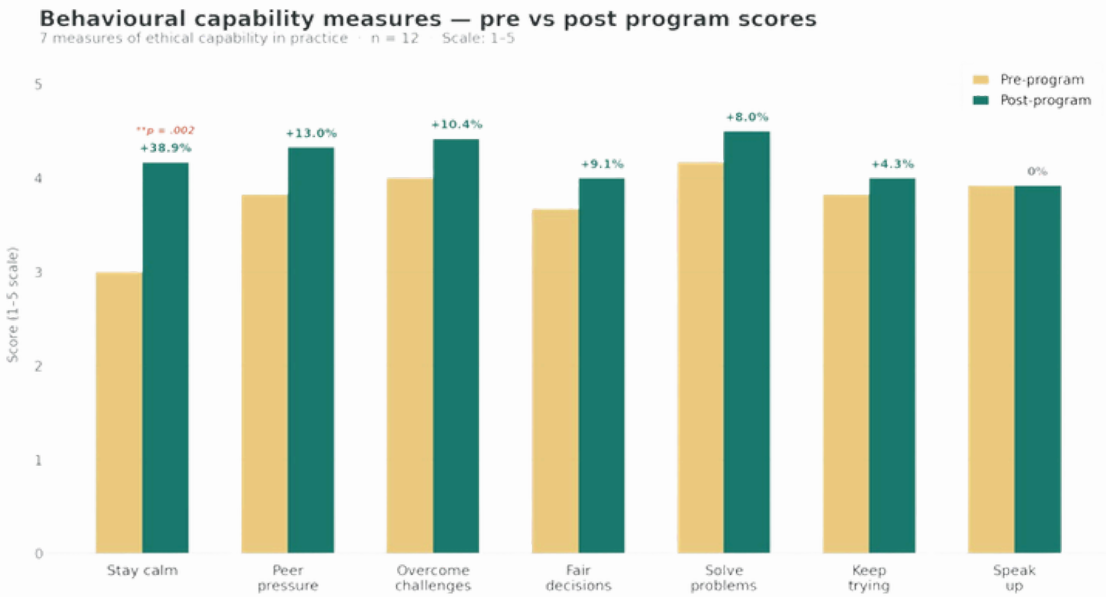
Emotional regulation showed the largest and statistically significant gain — a 38.9% improvement in students' self-reported capacity to stay calm and think clearly under pressure (Wilcoxon p = .002, large effect size). This was the only measure to reach significance after correction for multiple comparisons, and the finding aligns closely with what students and teachers independently described.

02

Peer pressure resistance improved by 13% and problem-solving resilience by 8–10% — directionally consistent with the emotional regulation finding, though not statistically significant at this sample size.

03

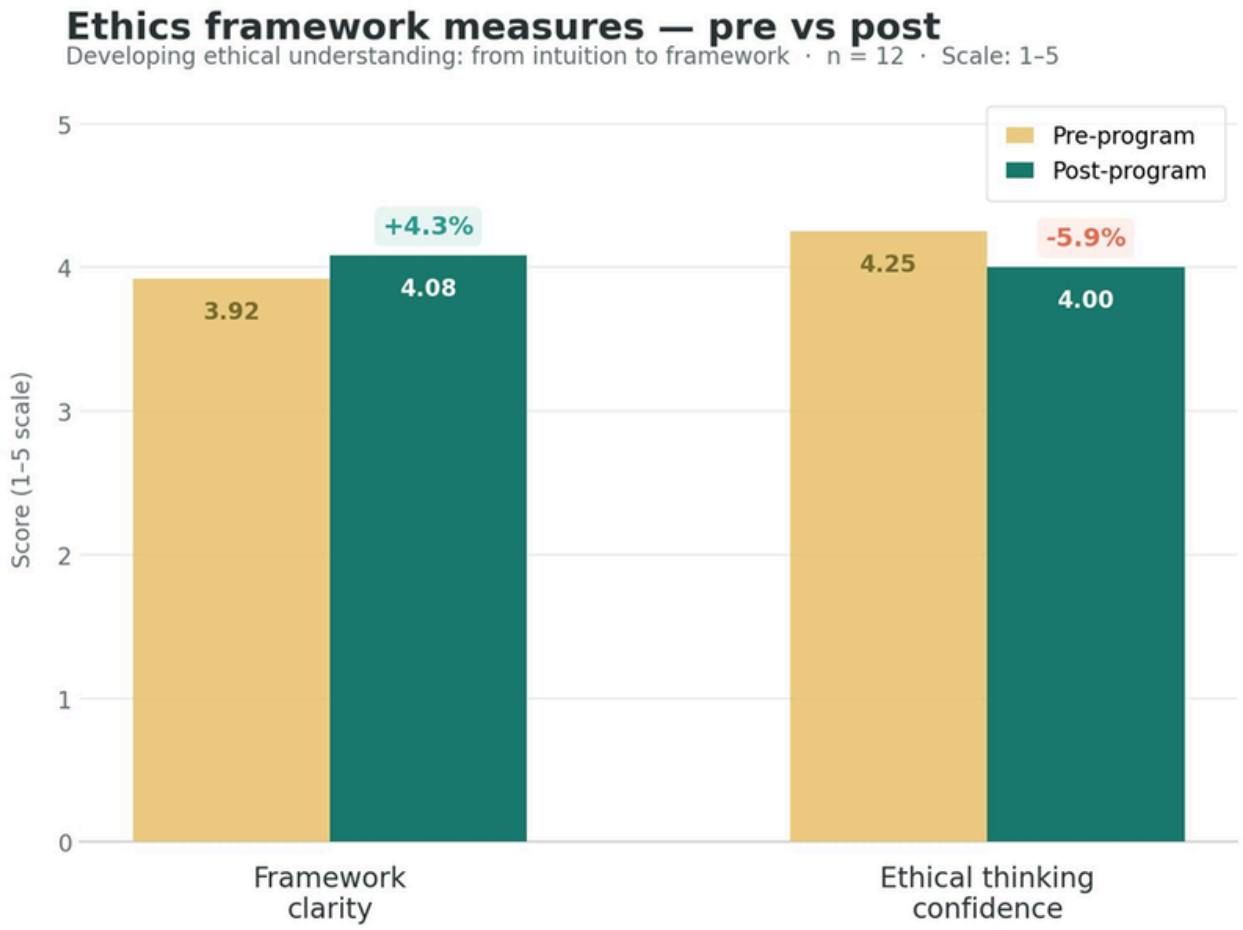
Eighty-three per cent of students reported a clearer sense of their ethics framework; 91% said they felt more confident addressing racism and discrimination; and 100% reported they were more likely to consider ethics in future decision-making.



One measure showed a decline: students' confidence in "applying ethical thinking" fell by 5.9%. This looks at first like a failure. The evidence suggests it is something more interesting.

Productive *Uncertainty*

Before the program, students rated their ethical thinking confidence highly, an average of 4.25 out of five. That confidence appears to have been built on an understanding of ethics as personal opinion. What the program did was reveal that ethical reasoning is more structured, more demanding, and less self-evident than that, and students' confidence adjusted accordingly.



This is consistent with a well-documented pattern in learning research: as novices develop genuine capability, they pass through a period of reduced confidence as they become aware of the complexity they had previously overlooked. Students' own words describe this shift. A related pattern appears in the data: on a parallel measure of whether students' ethics framework "helps make sense of the world," aggregate scores were essentially unchanged, but the movement within the sample was concentrated in students who began with the lowest confidence, the pattern you would expect if the program were sharpening self assessment rather than eroding belief.

What We *Learned*

about delivering ethics education in Australian schools

A pilot tells you about your program. It also tells you about the environment in which the program has to work. The 2025-2026 pilot taught us a good deal about both.

01

Discussion is the engine, not the content. Both students and teachers identified facilitated discussion, not the curriculum readings or structured frameworks, as the element that produced the deepest learning. The frameworks matter because they give the discussion traction. But the change happens when students talk to each other, challenged and supported, about things that matter to them. Program design that doesn't protect time for that conversation will underperform.

02

Secondary school timetables are unforgiving. We had hoped to engage a larger number of schools and to see more video projects submitted through the Design Out Racism capstone. Those numbers fell short, and the reasons were structural rather than programmatic. Teachers are time-poor. Discretionary curriculum time is contested. Ethics is rarely any one teacher's dedicated responsibility, which means finding a champion in each school is itself substantial work. Lessons that run over a standard period simply don't fit; content that requires extensive pre-reading from teachers won't get used. These are not excuses. They are the working reality of Australian secondary education, and any program that aspires to reach students at scale has to be designed for that reality rather than against it.

03

The curriculum was doing too much. Teachers and students both valued the frameworks and the content — but the weight of text-based material was crowding out the discussion that does the heaviest lifting. The implication is clear: reduce the reading burden, sharpen the frameworks, and expand the space for talk.

These three insights have shaped a material redesign of the program for 2026.

What This *Unlocks*

The 2025-2026 pilot set out to test whether ethical leadership could be taught, whether this curriculum produced change, and whether ethics education can realistically fit inside Australian secondary schools. The answer to the first two, based on the evidence available, is cautiously yes. The answer to the third is: it can, but only if we design for how schools actually work.

This is what we will seek to address in the next iteration.

For those interested in the future of ethical leadership in Australia, and in what it will take to equip a generation to meet the decisions ahead of them, Ethics by Design offers a concrete answer: a curriculum grounded in evidence, sharpened through iteration, and designed for the schools our young people actually attend.

We are grateful to the teachers, students, and principals who made the pilot possible.

Resources

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A note on evidence

This report draws on three sources: pre-post surveys completed by 12 matched student participants, focus groups and teacher feedback across seven pilot schools, and learning analytics. Quantitative findings are preliminary and based on a small sample; they are consistent with the qualitative evidence but require confirmation through the larger controlled evaluation planned for 2026.