

Ourschool's submission to the Australian government's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System



Ourschool

HELPING STATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS
BUILD THRIVING ALUMNI COMMUNITIES

Submission to the Australian government's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

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Introduction and overview

Ourschool is an education charity.

Our sole purpose is to teach public high schools how to build supportive alumni networks that inspire and benefit students.

Ourschool welcomes this opportunity to suggest some practical reforms for the consideration of the Review Panel.

Our submission is confined to chapters of the Review's Consultation Paper that are relevant to Ourschool's experience working closely with public high school principals and teachers at our partner schools.

The lessons we've learned from being embedded in our partner schools (our intensive service) or coaching existing education support school staff to establish a student-centred alumni program, give us a unique perspective on some of the key issues raised by the Review.

We don't pretend to have all the answers to the issues we've chosen to focus on. Instead, we propose four practical, systemic recommendations that will strengthen the capacities of public high schools.

We're mindful to avoid this submission being self-serving. Most of our proposals involve how Departments of Education can reimagine or amend the way teachers' work is organized or supported.

Our four proposed improvements are aimed at avoiding the blizzard of top-down bureaucratic processes, policies, strategies, and administrative hoops that often swamp public school principals and teachers.

Checking our bona fides

Before we begin the submission, the following two pages sum up the "why and what" of Ourschool.

We're rigorous about collecting evidence of our impact to report to our partner schools and government and philanthropic funders. Page 6 shows the aggregated impact data we collect from our partner schools.

We are currently helping 28 public high schools in Victoria who have sought our help to establish their alumni programs. 64% of our current partner schools have an ICSEA below 1000 and 46% of our current partner schools are regional schools.

Other survey findings showing evidence of Ourschool's impact on students, alumni and teachers are on Ourschool's [website](#)

Our service is unique in Australia.

Where appropriate in this submission, we briefly identify how alumni programs can help solve some of the problems raised in the Review's Consultation Paper.

Our submission includes some key findings from an analysis by Dandolo Partners of Ourschool's work and how alumni programs help students, especially disadvantaged students, leave school well. The full Dandolo Partners report is published on our [website](#).

Ourschool's approach is that of a place-based, capacity building model.

Once they teach a school how to run and sustain an effective, accountable alumni program, schools can choose to graduate from Ourschool's intensive support to lighter touch support from Ourschool or no support at all.

Source: Dandolo Partners report

Why Ourschool

Ourschool's purpose

Ourschool is solely devoted to helping public high schools build supportive alumni networks that benefit students and school communities.

Why?

Because the public high school system is a fundamental pillar of our democracy, educating teenagers regardless of their family income.

We're committed to creating equality of opportunity for public high school students, via supportive alumni networks.

We believe a thriving public school system is vital for our nation's prosperity and social cohesion.

All Australians win when our public high schools thrive.

"This VCAL student wasn't going to do year 12, after that industry insight session, they have enrolled for next year and know they want to work in sports events management. It's like they have a reason to be at school now. They've even applied for a scholarship [for a VET course]!"

- Teacher

Source: Dandolo Partners report

How our program works

What we do

We connect public high school alumni to their old schools to inspire students.

We do this by showing schools how to establish a student-centred program that is well-organised, accountable, and sustainable.

Then we help schools as they develop their alumni programs to benefit today's students and future generations.

How we do it

We give schools intensive support in the first few years of their partnership with Ourschool.

Then schools graduate to lighter touch support from us as they become more experienced running their alumni programs.

The five key things Ourschool's alumni program focuses on are:

1

Find and connect with alumni
to engage them with the school

2

Invite alumni back to school
to inspire students about study and career pathways

3

Create opportunities for student
via alumni providing work experience

4

Invite alumni to provide philanthropic support
for students and schools: scholarships, fundraising projects, gifts in wills

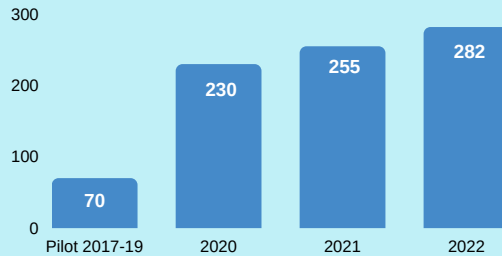
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Collect basic KPI data
to show evidence of impact to the school community.

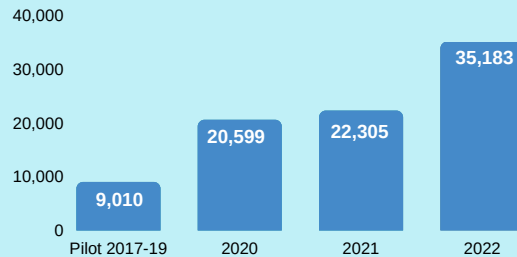
Ourschool - strengthening state high schools

Supporting teachers, enriching curriculum, inspiring students, building school-community connections

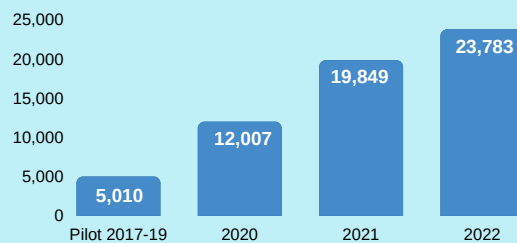
More alumni sessions



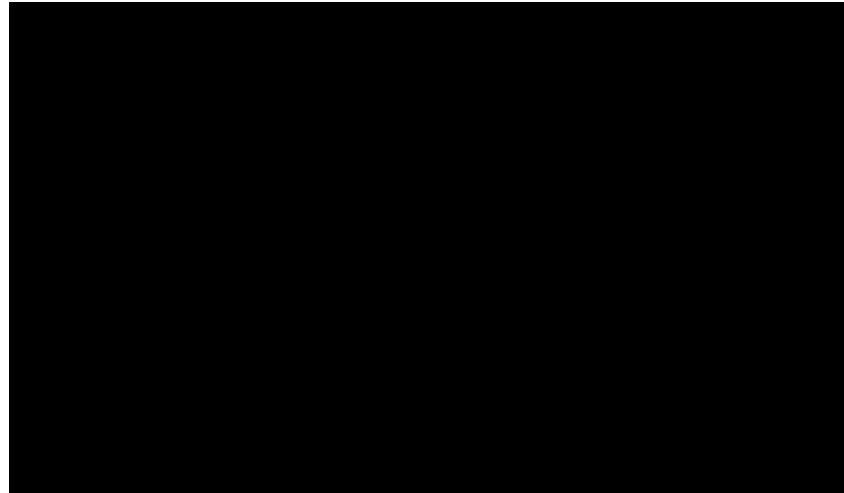
Reaching more students



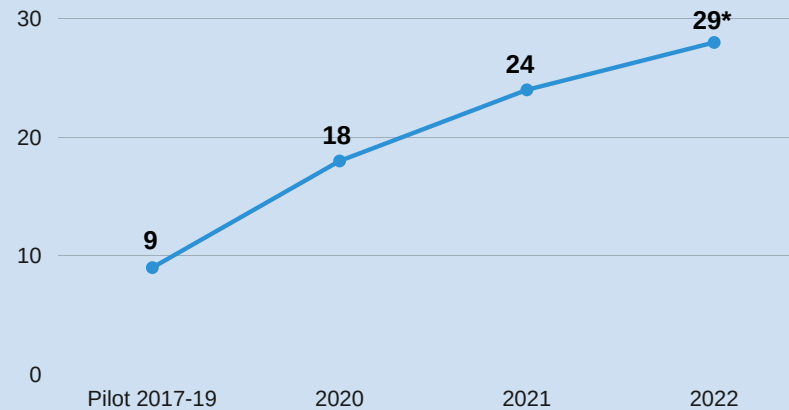
More alumni engaged with their school's alumni program



An Ourschool alumni session in action

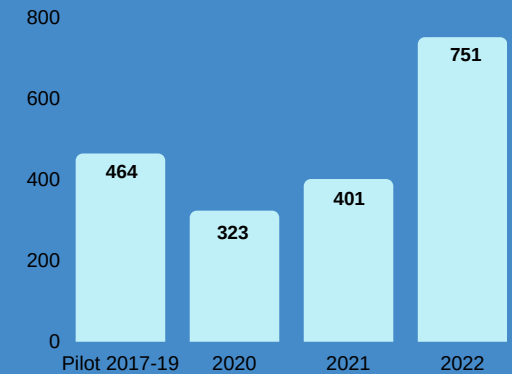


Working with more partner schools

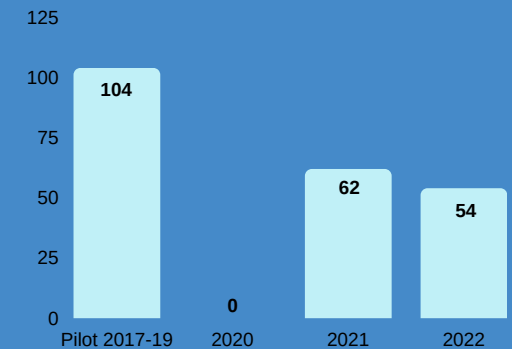


* Number of subscriber schools for 2022.
Data collected from 28 of 29 subscriber schools.

Alumni volunteers participating in sessions



Work experience opportunities offered for students by alumni



Work experience places not sought in 2020 due to COVID. 2021, 2022 also affected by the pandemic.

How to improve student outcomes, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Section 2.4 of the Review's Consultation Paper shows Australia has one of the highest concentrations of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools in the OECD and the trend is worsening. It explains how this concentration of disadvantage contributes to poorer outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It's widely accepted by education researchers that the high school sector is where the segregation of Australia's children along socio-economic lines is most acute and worsening. The public high school sector is in danger of becoming a residual system, viewed by many parents as an inferior option to better resourced non-government high schools.

This is an alarming trend. It must be reversed to ensure we have socially cohesive local communities and equality of opportunity for students.



We need to improve the way we share the expertise of principals who've turned struggling public schools around.

Postcode is not destiny. High quality school leadership is.

Every education department in Australia has data that reveals when a struggling public school becomes a turnaround school - one that has steadily improved its performance and reputation in its local community.

That data includes NAPLAN results, attitudes to school survey data, school completion rates and other internal data collected by departments. It includes data showing increased enrolments from families choosing to send their children to the school and enrolment waiting lists.

Therefore, education departments know who these highly successful public school principals of turnaround schools are. Departments also know which public school principals are achieving student results and staff satisfaction results well above schools with similar student demographics.

Ourschool believes education departments need to be more proactive in sharing the expertise of these highly successful principals.

We acknowledge that education departments have professional development structures and school improvement teams to help leaders of struggling schools. But. . .

Many of these initiatives are not user-friendly or tailored for school-based, highly responsive mentoring of school principals.

Current programs often involve principals leaving their schools for professional development seminars. Other initiatives operate on a fly-in fly out model, involving consultants who are highly credentialled but may not be experienced school principals with a proven track record of improving student results at their schools.

Some states and territories have mentor programs where principals are mentored by recently retired principals.

For example, Victoria does. But the following case studies of two highly regarded former Victorian public high school principals reveal why improvements are urgently required to attract and retain the best school principals as mentors.

Neither of these high-performance principals have been asked by the education department to be a mentor since they retired.

Case Study 1: Pitsa Binnion

Pitsa Binnion is one of Victoria's most distinguished public high school principals.

When she began her principalship at ██████████ Secondary College 15 years ago, she inherited a school that was struggling for enrolments and had dilapidated facilities.

She is renowned in Victoria's education sector for turning the Melbourne suburban school into a runaway success, where families are clamoring to enrol their children.

Last year the Victorian Government awarded her its top honour for secondary school leaders, the Colin Simpson Outstanding Secondary Principal Award.

Ms Binnion was also awarded a Public Service Medal (PSM) as part of the 2022 Queen's Birthday honours list for her outstanding service to public education in Victoria.

She retired from ██████████ Secondary College at the end of 2022 after a 35-year career in public high schools.

Since then, she has been deluged with requests from non-government schools seeking her help as a mentor to school leadership teams.

In contrast, she has not received any requests from the Victorian education department to mentor any public high school principals.

Ms Binnion declined the requests from private schools because her loyalties lie with the public school sector. "I'm a product of the public school system and I'm proudly flying the flag for the public system," she says.

Her expertise has not been completely lost to the public system. Two public high school principals personally reached out to her seeking her mentorship.

She is currently mentoring these leaders at their individual schools, focusing on improving student attendance, results, and attitudes to school.

"The experience of principals with a successful track record is invaluable to share with other principals in the public system," Ms Binnion says. "We can all learn from each other."

Case Study 2: Judy Crowe*

Judy Crowe recently dropped out of the education department's mentoring program for new principals because she was frustrated by the program's overly bureaucratic workload and administrative requirements.

Ms Crowe has 20-years' experience leading public high schools in regional Victoria and Melbourne. During 12 years at the helm of ██████████ Girls' College, she turned the school into one of the state's leading public high schools.

For the past two years she mentored several new principals. The scheme operates on an opt-in model, with retired principals volunteering to be involved. Ms Crowe opted in.

But she says the program's application and reporting processes for mentors were excessively bureaucratic and have deterred many retired principals from applying.

"The last thing that retired principals want to do is be constrained by too much administrivia," she says.

"A lot of the professional development units we were required to do to become mentors were inappropriate for experienced principals.

"The system is also administered by bureaucrats who often don't understand the level of experience that you bring to mentoring. They expect you to jump through too many administrative hoops and the bureaucratic burdens then become too much."



Judy Crowe: Former Principal, Melbourne Girls' College
Photographer: Ken Spence

Ms Crowe says the opt-in approach was not the best way to attract the most suitable mentors.

"Self-nomination is problematic. And the program is not user-friendly for mentors, so the department loses a lot of good, talented people who want to give back."

*Judy Crowe is the co founder and board chair of Ourschool. She is a former president of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, a position elected by her peers.

How to improve student outcomes, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds



OUR RECOMMENDATION 1: Establish or improve an in-school mentorship system that matches recently retired, highly successful public school principals with principals in struggling public schools.

Action plan for recommendation 1:

- Education departments should use their school improvement data to identify, invite and select highly successful retired principals to be mentors.
- Education departments should seek and implement advice from high performance principals nearing retirement/those who have experienced mentoring to design user-friendly, improved mentoring programs.
- These mentoring programs for public school principals and their leadership teams should be universally available to all public schools to avoid stigma. However, education departments should prioritise matching highly successful principals with principals and leadership teams in struggling schools.
- The data categories used for candidate selection should be transparent and published.
- Avoid overloading these part-time mentor roles with onerous PD, compliance, and reporting mechanisms. Trust and flexibility should be central to the program's design, with school improvement data used to select mentors and measure progress over realistic timeframes.
- The mentor program should be promoted widely as a positive way to support principals and their leadership teams, so it becomes embedded in the culture and traditions of the public school system.

The advantages of recommendation 1:

- Leverages existing school improvement data.
- Provides bespoke, more responsive, and regular support to current principals.
- Embeds mentorship of school leadership teams as an accepted feature of individual school culture and routines.
- Staunches the flow of experience and wisdom currently being lost to the public high school system.
- Establishes a formalized transition pathway for high performance principals nearing retirement.

How to improve student outcomes, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds continued....



We need to improve community engagement with public high schools to strengthen a school's opportunities for students and its local reputation.

Section 1.4 of the Review's Consultation Paper (pp 10 & 11) emphasizes the following:

Schools where students achieve regardless of their circumstance or background tend to have several features in common:

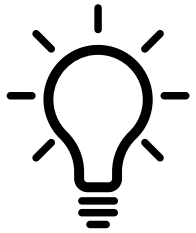
- They pursue an explicit improvement agenda – they know what they want to see improve and they know how they will monitor success.
- The staff of the school work together as a team, supporting each other and sharing a clear focus on supporting quality teaching and learning in the school.
- Efforts are made to identify and understand the learning needs of students in the school and to use available human and physical resources to address those needs.
- The school builds relationships with parents and others outside the school in support of its improvement agenda.

This last point, about building relationships with parents and others outside school is relevant to Ourschool's experience. Our data shows that alumni programs are a practical and meaningful way to build such relationships.

Why? Because alumni are not strangers. They are the most likely community members to engage with a school because they have an emotional bond to their old high schools.

Sadly, supportive alumni networks are common in the non-government school sector but they are absent in the schools that need them the most – public high schools.

How to improve student outcomes, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds continued....



We need to bring relatable role models into schools to inspire students about potential career pathways.

Section 2 of the Review's Consultation Paper outlines the urgent need to lift the outcomes, attendance, and school completion rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ourschool's [survey data](#) reveals that alumni programs in public high schools can lift student aspirations and make school more meaningful for students.

Too many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, don't have access to relatable career role models. They struggle to see the relevance of schoolwork or imagine a job they might like to do.

Alumni are relatable role models because they've been to the same school, and they're proof that "people like me" can succeed.

- See page 13 of this submission for an extract of an analysis of Ourschool's program by Dandolo Partners.
- See page 14 of this submission to see how Ourschool's program improves excellence and equity for the priority cohorts of disadvantaged students identified by the Review and how it focuses on helping overcome well-documented weak points in our high school system.

- See page 15 of this submission for findings from an international study that show how Ourschool's alumni program supports teachers and enriches curriculum.

Our experience is that public high school alumni are enthusiastic to give back to their old schools if their school connects with them in a professional, well-organised and sustainable manner.

Unfortunately, the public high school system has mainly ignored its alumni.

Meanwhile, in the non-government school sector, the compounding benefits that private schools gain from building their alumni networks are self-evident and growing exponentially.

Alumni networks matter

Alumni networks increase student exposure to role models, the world of work, a strong school community and high teacher morale. We know these four domains are important contributors to leaving school well.

Alumni networks are an additional resource for schools to access that provide students with...

- Relatable and motivational guest speakers
- Work experience opportunities
- Career sessions
- Work / office day trips / excursions
- Subject sessions – providing real world examples related to curriculum / subject context

This exposes students to...

Role models

&

The world of work

Alumni are a high-quality example of role models because they have experienced similar educational opportunities as students which:

- Makes the achievements of alumni seem attainable to students
- More likely to be an authentic interaction with students
- Increases the likelihood that students will engage with the session / activity.

Alumni strengthen students' connection to the world of work through demonstrating:

- Authentic examples of positive post-school pathways and destinations
- Alternative / diverse career opportunities
- How what they are learning applies to the real world
- Practical steps to access post-school pathways.

Which builds student confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations.

Students are exposed to positive relatable role models enabling them to build on their self-efficacy. Students are exposed to success stories and examples of post-school pathways in a way that builds their confidence and helps them build their own aspirations, making it more likely for students to make a positive transition to work or study after school.

And builds...

School community

&

Teacher morale

Alumni help to strengthen a school community through:

- Being visible to parents of current students as examples of successful pathways
- Contributing as a member of the school community, broadening the school's network outside the school gate.

Alumni help to build teacher morale through:

- Providing validation that teachers supported them to achieve future success
- Expressing their gratitude to past teachers when they return to the school
- Connecting curriculum and lessons to the real world through subject specific sessions.
- Exposing teachers to current opportunities and the job market
- Re-energised work / school environment

Which Improves the school and learning environment.

Students, parents, teachers and alumni are given an opportunity to develop positive relationships through the alumni network, strengthening the school community and a deeper sense of belonging at the school.

How Ourschool's program improves excellence and equity for the priority cohorts of disadvantaged students identified by the Review

Alumni programs address student disadvantage by:

- Helping break the link between student disadvantage and low aspirations, via alumni as relatable role models
- Enriching teaching and learning because Alumni Program Coordinators liaise with teachers and engage alumni with classroom curriculum and school needs.
- Alumni being the visible, relevant bridges for students between school and the workplace.

Alumni programs deliver excellence in student learning by:

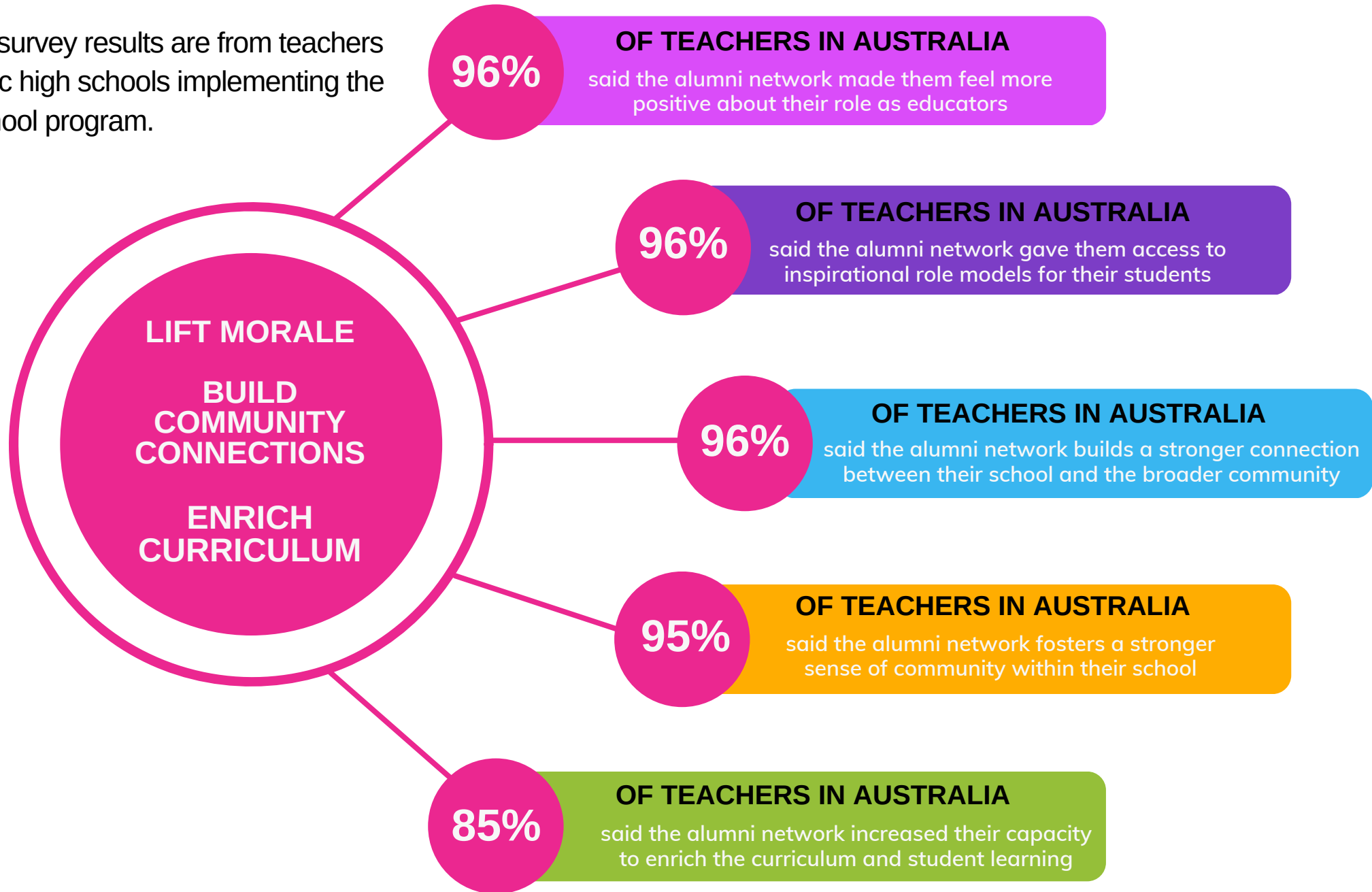
- Invigorating senior secondary pathways and careers education via alumni returning to school as relatable role models
- Elevating the status of vocational pathways
- Engaging with industry – alumni bring contemporary industry experience into the classroom
- Connecting industry to schools at a local level - a key recommendation of the Australian Government's 2020 Shergold review into senior secondary pathways.

High School joined Ourschool's program in 2022.

High School has an ICSEA of 980, according to ACARA.

How alumni programs support Australian teachers

These survey results are from teachers in public high schools implementing the Ourschool program.



How to improve student outcomes, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds continued...



OUR RECOMMENDATION 2: Lift student aspirations and community engagement in struggling schools by helping public high schools establish alumni programs.

Action plan for recommendation 2:

- Education departments should create and fund a full-time alumni program coordinator position in each public high school.
- The position is classified as an education support role (not a teaching position). The role is focused on advancing the school and its students by connecting alumni with the school.

The advantages of recommendation 2:

- It enriches teaching and student learning, especially in careers education
- It gives teachers and students a supportive community network they feel proud to belong to
- It does not add to teacher workloads because alumni program coordinators do all of the work connecting with alumni and running the alumni classrooms sessions, with teachers present in these classroom sessions
- It builds positive relationships with community members, thus strengthening a school's reputation in its local community
- It helps level the playing field in secondary school education
- It is a cost-effective approach to community-building because alumni are volunteers, motivated by goodwill and generosity of spirit

How to improve the working environment of teachers and enable them to be deployed more effectively

Page 15 earlier in this submission shows how alumni programs improve the working environment of teachers. They lift teacher morale while adding support and value to teachers' classroom work.

Alumni returning to school to take part in alumni sessions bring joy to teachers. We know this because we hear this feedback from teachers every day in our work. These simple, human connections, created by an alumni program, are a meaningful, authentic way to value and endorse teachers immediately, in real time interactions at schools.

Such evidence shows that alumni programs help improve teachers' working environment.

And most crucially in relation to teacher wellbeing, an alumni program does not add to teacher workloads.

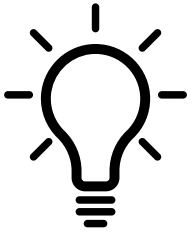
The alumni career pathway sessions or subject-specific sessions that are a flagship element of our program are organized and run by the alumni program coordinator. The coordinator liaises closely with teachers to organize a suitable time to bring an alum or a group of alumni into a classroom and the coordinator hosts the session, with the classroom teacher present.

This following section of Ourschool's submission deals with a more obvious reform to reduce teacher workload and attract and retain teachers.

We believe there is a structural, system-wide fix that would dramatically reduce the non-teacher duties that burden public high school teachers.

Once again, we focus on public high schools because these are the schools we work with.

How to improve the working environment of teachers and enable them to be deployed more effectively continued...



Public schools need to have a professional communications and events coordinator on staff.

It is not fair or efficient for teachers to be expected to do communications and events jobs in public schools.

Every large organization, from commercial businesses to government education departments, understands that high quality, professional communications with their stakeholders are crucial for their organisation's success.

Hence, they employ qualified communications and event management specialists for these designated roles.

Public high schools are large, complex organisations. Yet it is common for teachers to be given communications and event management tasks on top of their teaching duties.

These duties include running school open days, parent information nights, sports days, producing the school newsletter, producing the annual school magazine, running the school's social media and producing social media posts, updating the school website, organising excursions, school trips. The list goes on.

For example, in Victoria, the public school system has Positions of Responsibility, where teachers are given a few hours per week and an extra stipend to do these non-teaching roles on top of their teaching duties.

It is an extremely inefficient, outdated, and inappropriate approach to staffing these much needed, specialist non-teaching roles in schools. It leads to teacher frustration and burnout.

And unsurprisingly, such a piecemeal approach also leads to communications and events that are often underwhelming in quality for participants and audiences, particularly parents and prospective parents.

A recent Grattan Institute report, *Making Time for Great Teaching*, found that 20 per cent of an Australian teacher's time is taken up by extra curricula activities and meetings which are not part of their core teaching-related work. And another 8% of teacher time was spent on general administrative activities.

The Grattan report found that 68 per cent of teachers agreed that support staff could cover their extra-curricular activities.

In the non-government school system, there is a well-established tradition of communications and event professionals being employed to do this specialist work in schools. This is not so in the public school system.

We believe that the current piecemeal approach of expecting teachers to take on specialist communications and event management roles, on top of their core professional roles as teachers, is no longer tenable in the public school system. It has led to inferior communications and teacher burnout.

How to improve the working environment of teachers and enable them to be deployed more effectively



OUR RECOMMENDATION 3: That education departments create a new mandatory staff position in each public school for a communications and events role.

Action plan for recommendation 3:

- This communications and events coordinator role should be a full-time, designated non-teaching position.
- It should be a mandatory, on-site position, funded by government as part of each public school's support staff team.

The advantages of recommendation 3:

- It reduces excessive teacher workloads.
- It enables teachers to focus on their core roles and improve their teaching.
- It improves the quality of school communications to parents, students, staff and the wider community.
- It strengthens the organizational capacity of each school.
- It gives a school the ability to develop a team of community engagement specialists – an alumni program coordinator and a communications/events coordinator – who can work together to support the teaching staff, engage the community within the school and beyond, and advance the school.
- It reduces school-based inequities in communications expertise that currently exist between public schools and their non-government counterparts.

How pride can improve student wellbeing and belonging



We need to learn from the private school system.

Chapter three of the Review's Consultation Paper deals with mental health and wellbeing of students.

The Review Panel will undoubtedly receive many helpful submissions from mental health and wellbeing experts able to answer the panel's questions about this subject.

We are obviously not wellbeing or mental health experts. However, we would like to propose some practical things, relevant to our experience working with schools, that could help improve a student's sense of belonging in a school.

Section 3.1.3 of the Review's Consultation Paper states that schools play an important part in the wellbeing of students, particularly when it comes to belonging.

The Consultation Paper describes many things that schools are doing to help students feel a sense of belonging.

We believe that a student's sense of personal pride about the school they go to, their awareness of their school's history in educating generations before them and their awareness of being part of this heritage, can help build a student's self-esteem and their sense that they belong to an important cultural institution.

Knowing and appreciating that you stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before you and that you are contributing to this continuum can have a positive impact on your wellbeing and sense of belonging to a supportive community. In general, the private school system does this very well.

Private schools pay tribute to their school's history by promoting it explicitly on their websites, their school walls, and their communications to the school and wider community.

They treasure their archives, especially their pictorial archives, and use them to tell a compelling story about the school's heritage. This builds a sense of community pride and belonging within the school and the local community.

How pride can improve student wellbeing and belonging continued...

In general, public schools don't do this well or in many cases, not at all. They fail to do the simple things that private schools do to signal to students, parents, and the wider community that the school is a proud custodian of its heritage.

For example, very few public schools have an Our History page on their websites. Too many public high schools have office reception areas devoid of any reference to the school's history or heritage. The absence of these modest acknowledgements and visual signals has a cumulative impact on public and individual perceptions and attitudes towards the school.

It can also contribute to students feeling lesser than their peers at other schools.

This quote from a recent graduate of one of our partner schools sums up the problem we are describing:

“ There was never a sense of pride about being at this school. Instead, it was like, ‘Oh, we’re just a public school’.”

We understand that thinly stretched budgets in public high schools are a reason why schools make decisions to spend precious resources on more urgent activities related to the core business of teaching and learning.

However, the marketing and communications divisions of education departments have the expertise and resources to help solve this messaging deficit that exists in the public school system.

Every school has a history from the moment it enrolls its first students.

How pride can improve student wellbeing and belonging continued...



OUR RECOMMENDATION 4: That education departments direct their marketing and communications divisions to show public schools how to implement low-cost, effective ways to showcase a school's history.

Action plan for recommendation 4:

- The education department's marketing and communications team creates a practical "how to" guide that gives public schools tips and templates on how to improve a school's messaging and displays of its history and artefacts.
- The education department gives this guide to every public school.

The advantages of recommendation 4:

- It leverages communications expertise in education departments and applies that expertise to solving a practical need in public schools.
- It saves time for on the ground staff in schools. They don't have to start from scratch and can amend the guide's templates and advice to suit their individual school context and needs.
- It gives expert advice to new schools on how they can start to implement a professional approach to promoting the school's provenance and heritage.
- It helps merger schools (those created from former local schools) to embrace the heritage (and alumni) of these former schools and to acknowledge that these foundation schools and their alumni are valued members of the merger school's community.
- It's a cost effective way to help schools build pride and belonging among students, teachers, parents and in the wider local community.

Don't take our word for it.....hear from Cranbourne Secondary College

Finally, we encourage you to view the following four-minute video made by Cranbourne Secondary College and published on YouTube.

It's a very moving example of what students, alumni and a school principal say about having an alumni program at their school:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5unlsPYZ_k

Ourschool thanks the Review Panel and the Australian government for the opportunity to submit our views on how to inform a better and fairer education system.

Ourschool agrees to our submission being published by the Review Panel and the Australian government's Department of Education.

