



Celebrating and Modelling Achievement: An evaluation of the Back to School Program

"I believe that the Back to School event was a great idea as it taught us so much about ourselves and what we could do in the future and what we can achieve." [Student]

This report summarises the findings of research conducted by Helen Stokes and Malcolm Turnbull at the Australian Youth Research Centre.

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Context

This evaluation report will examine and assess the Back to School Program currently administered and co-ordinated by Education Foundation in partnership with state education departments and Coles.

The Back to School Program (formerly called Back to School DAY) is an initiative of Education Foundation. Aiming to celebrate the achievements of the Australian public school system, the program seeks to reconnect past students with their public primary or secondary school to provide young people with access and exposure to diverse of potential role models. The initiative was driven by three key objectives: connect, inspire and succeed. In line with Education Foundation's strong outreach to schools and young people in marginalised or socio-economically challenged communities, an estimated 77% of participants fall within the Like Schools Group range 4-9 (i.e. moderately to severely disadvantaged).

Back to School was initiated by Education Foundation in 2002 and has been conducted nationally since 2004. 110 high profile Australians took part in events held at 368 schools across the country. While the participation rate represented a 75% increase over the previous year, Education Foundation staff note that registrations fell far short of their target of 1000 schools. It was acknowledged, however, that official figures may not be a completely accurate reflection of actual participation, and that there is evidence of schools conducting Back to School-style events without formally registering with Education Foundation.

The Back to School program is underpinned by five overall aims and intentions:

- To celebrate the school's role in the local community
- To showcase the achievements of the school and its students and teachers
- To connect public schools to their former students and create an infrastructure to develop an active Alumni
- To support teachers and schools by offering practical frameworks (a) to source former students as speakers, and (b) to engage the community through school-based activities
- To inspire young people through diverse role models

As a general rule the Back to School event/activity takes the form of a morning visit. The visiting celebrities/alumni typically address school assembly, spend time with selected classes, tour the facility and join members of the school community at morning tea. While the length of the activity varies from setting to setting, most Back to School events last around an hour.

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Findings

Feedback from student and teacher surveys and interviews with representatives of three schools that participated in Back to School 2008, confirmed that the program has continued to be successful in meeting two main objectives.

Objective 1.

To provide role models for young people in Australian government schools

Interviews with teachers, an Education Foundation representative and school leaders provided numerous examples of students having responded positively (a) to visiting alumni as role models, and (b) to accounts of individual achievement and the overriding message that success is attainable. This confirmed survey findings that 57% of students had identified significantly with the visitor as role model and felt proud to be attending the same school. 73% of the sample expressed moderate to very strong admiration for their alumnus while 79% of the sample rated the experience as either 'good' or 'fantastic'.

*"I think it was great and you should continue it because it really helps kids to think."
[Student]*

"They spoke with pride and emotion so I would like to see the Back to School program happen again so that it could inspire others like they inspired me and many other people! Great speech, it was like they took us back to when they [were] actually back at school! Hope to see them again!" [Student]

Interview responses indicated (a) that the effectiveness of the program/event is strongly influenced by the capacity of alumni to engage and interact with the host students, and (b) that the ability to establish rapport can be more useful and important in this regard than celebrity status. While there some feeling that the celebrity status of the alumnus can be influential ("What's needed is someone with higher profile, someone who the kids actually know or have heard about"), there was also strong recognition that (a) the content of the presentation and (b) the presenter's rapport with students were more of important considerations. Instances were cited of "lower profile" visitors having spoken to "rapt audiences interested to see what people had been able to go on and do".

There was also recognition that the event generally works best (a) when it enjoys strong support from school leadership and the overall school community, and (b) when it is integrated into the school curriculum.

School representative interviewees reported varying experiences of the Back to School program and, accordingly, differed in their assessments of the program's success at fulfilling its key objectives. A spokesperson for one school, for instance, expressed mild disappointment that a visit by the district's Mayor had been "superficial".

For us it just wasn't useful ... We took him on a tour of the school and he spoke on 'Parade' for five minutes to the Year 8s ... Told them stories of his time here ... He spoke well and the kids listened politely but it didn't have much meaning for them ... A 'mayor' means nothing to them [other than] their parents complaining about the Council Rates ... Perhaps Sports figures might have had more impact. [Teacher]

The teacher in question believed that less formal visits by other alumni had been more successful than the Back to School event in providing students with role models .

Objective 2.

To celebrate the achievements of Australian government schools and the public education system

All but one teachers who responded to our survey viewed Back to School events as either a moderately or very effective way to celebrate the achievements of public schools. While interviewees differed in their assessments of the program's effectiveness in this regard, there was recognition of its potential to generate positive publicity for both school and alumnus. The value of the exercise in heightening school communities' awareness of their own histories and linkages was also cited.

At the same time, interview data highlighted a number of barriers to Back to School's expansion and development in 2008, including under-use of the program's website, lack of resources in schools; competing pressures on school timetables; an unanticipated lack of promotion, delays in implementing the Back to School Alumni Strategy (launched in 2007); and (in particular) ongoing difficulties in locating, recruiting and reconnecting suitable alumni. More positively, schools uniformly commended the accessibility, efficiency and supportiveness of Education Foundation staff in facilitating individual Back to School events.

Education Foundation staff noted that feedback from participating schools had been "generally enthusiastic", citing word-of-mouth evidence that "it [the program] changes kids", providing them with "examples of what you can achieve when you want to" and demonstrating that success "is not just in the reach of the rich and famous ... Kids are seeing successful adults who have had the same opportunities ... and have made the most of them". While "schools that do hold the event [generally] speak highly of it", there was acknowledgment that the program currently falls short of complete success in achieving its target numbers and in meeting its objectives.

A number of contributing factors and/or barriers to greater participation and wider implementation of Back to School were cited. These included

- The reality that, unlike many private schools which are able to "free up" staff to coordinate activities such as Back to School, Public schools are "under-resourced" as a rule. Accordingly, the development of Alumni Associations "hasn't happened yet".
- Schools are typically "under pressure" and sometimes experience difficulty fitting Back to School into their timetables with "other events looming"
- Reluctance by schools to access the interactive Back to School website introduced in 2007. ("Organisers are [often] not very computer savvy ... more responsive to manual registration").
- Above all, the ongoing difficulty of recruiting alumni. "People had commitments – training, CD launches, preparing for the Olympics ... A couple of AFL Players wanted to go back to their schools but the schools were not interested ... [they] had had enough footballers return" [EF staff]

By contrast, representatives of participating schools praised Education Foundation's efficient handling of the overall Back to School process, and cited this as a contributing factor to the success of the event. Dandenong Primary School, for instance, described Education Foundation administration and program guidelines as "very good ... they set up the visit, sent out information on how to deal with the visitor...came out the first time ... and acted as go-between ...". Enfield High School similarly praised Education Foundation staff efficiency and described the contacts as "very smooth...arrangements for the day were all fine".

Education Foundation literature indicates that many schools have chosen to make Back to School a regular feature of their calendars, suggesting a growing perception that the event works most effectively when integrated into the general curriculum. Certainly, there was uniform agreement among the three schools interviewed for this report that the event had more potential impact and value when associated with existing school programs than when staged as a "one-off" or "stand alone" activity. By way of example, the Principal of Redcliffe High School felt (a) that her school's event would have meant more had it enabled students to "establish a lasting relationship" with the visitor and (b) that a systematic sequence of interactions between alumnus and students "might work better as a regular mentoring exercise ... The one-off thing is useless".

Maximising the Impact of a Back to School event

Based on their experiences of the program, teacher interviewees believed that several elements needed to be in place to make the event "work", in particular:

- Availability of a designated contact person to ensure effective liaison between school, Education Foundation and the intending visitor
- Rigorous promotion of the planned event both within the school and wider communities
- Active support for the event from school leadership and other members of the school community

The importance was stressed of amply preparing the intending visitor for the event, ensuring that he/she was briefed as to (often significant) shifts in the school's demographic and culture over intervening years or decades; "It was important to make him aware of our situation ... giving him opportunities to ask 'How can I help?'"

Conclusion

Survey data and information from interviews confirmed that the Back to School Program continues to enjoy a fair degree of success in (a) providing young people with role models and (b) in celebrating the achievements of Public schools. However, feedback suggests that there is potential for substantially greater enrolment in the program and for its systematic development and expansion. Education Foundation staff highlighted the need (a) to promote the concept more widely; (b) to increase registration numbers; (c) to redevelop and streamline the registration process so that Education Foundation obtains accurate information and figures on participation rates; and (d) to further engage schools in accessing the program's website.

There was also recognition that greater emphasis should be placed (a) on developing a sturdy alumni base, (b) on recruiting significantly greater numbers of alumni to the program, and (c) on actively facilitating their re-connection with schools. To that end, suggested strategies included production of a CD or DVD highlighting potential benefits of the program for both host schools and past and present students.

Recommendations

Positive responses to the Back to School program by teachers and students included recommendations:

- That Education Foundation continue to promote and facilitate Back to School events throughout the country
- That support be given, where possible, to assisting participant schools to integrate Back to School into their general curriculum

In recognition of perceived existing barriers to participation in, or facilitation of, Back to School, and in the interests of program expansion, it is recommended:

- That Education Foundation make recruitment of alumni, and their reconnection to schools, a priority
 - That Education Foundation continue to expand and develop its Back to School Alumni Strategy (initiated in 2007)
 - That Education Foundation explore strategies for increased promotion and marketing of Back to School
 - That Education Foundation streamline its online registration processes in the interests of accessibility and reliability
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