

Starting to build an alumni network: A step by step guide

At Future First, our vision is for a world where a young person's start in life does not limit their future. We work across the UK supporting schools to build thriving networks of alumni who can inspire and motivate their current students.

81% of young people attending our alumni events last year told us that meeting former students showed them that 'people like me' can be successful. In addition, 73% reported they felt more confident about the future as a result of encounters with former students. Such interactions are incredibly valuable, and this guide will help you get started with building your own alumni community who will then be able to support your school in a range of diverse ways.

Getting Started

An alumni community is a fantastic resource to have whether you're looking to fundraise, raise aspirations or to provide role models who can contribute to your existing careers programme. Before you begin, it's important that you decide how you'll securely store the data of alumni contact details. This could be in a password protected spreadsheet or an online resource such as Future First's alumni portal. You will also need to get consent for this data to be stored from all alumni.

You'll begin by reaching out to ask alumni to opt-in to receive emails and updates from you. To start spreading the word we'd recommend that you take a few key actions:

- Ask members of staff to reach out to alumni that they might still be in touch with
- Inform parents who may well be former students themselves, or who might know alumni of the school, by sending out a newsletter
- Set up an alumni page on your school website
- Contact any businesses that might be partnered with the school and ask them to spread the word on their staff intranet

Using Social Media

Social media is a quick and effective method of reaching out to a larger number of alumni to let them know that you're looking for their involvement back at school. With frequent posts and updates, you can share the many different reasons why you'd like to keep in touch with your alumni, and these can be easily targeted to different audiences. Tailor posts to those who'd like to reconnect with old classmates, or alumni who might like to offer practical support by volunteering with students.

Using old pictures can be very helpful in making your online posts successful. Pictures of the school or of former classes appeals to a sense of nostalgia and can encourage an emotional response, which can be key in encouraging people to give back to their old school and your students.

Facebook is a handy platform as there tends to be more links between school pages, community groups and individuals where your call out for alumni can be seen.

FundEd.org.uk

Twitter is great for sending out frequent posts with requests for alumni to get in touch, and can be easily shared by any school or staff members for a bigger reach.

LinkedIn can be incredibly effective as it allows you to search by school. You can send invites and personalised messages to request that they get involved in your alumni community, and access networks of alumni who might already be linked by school.

When you begin reaching out, remember to ask alumni to let their former classmates know! Asking them to spread the word not only helps you grow the network quicker, but also helps build a sense of community.

Engaging your network

Building your network of alumni will be an ongoing project, and you'll discover which methods work best for you and your school. As the number of alumni interested in giving back to their school increases, you'll need to find ways of keeping them engaged.

When you've built up a community of alumni who've opted in to hearing from you, your next step will be ensuring that they feel connected. That sense of connectivity is the 'engagement' process, ensuring your alumni community feels valued as part of school life. You'll want to make sure that they're aware of things that are going on at school and of any ways that they might be able to support.

Frequent engagement is key. If your plan is to include alumni in the curriculum, or as part of your careers programme or ask for donations, you'll be sending out lots of invites and requests for that support. It's a good idea to make sure that these communications reach out to everyone in your network, whether or not they can support via volunteering or donating.

Termly newsletters or updates are an easy way to achieve this as they appeal to everyone, and can contain information about what support you'd like. For more impact, try to make these interactive and personal. You could update alumni when a staff member is retiring, or offer the chance for them to send a message to someone who used to teach them.

To go the extra mile, you could invite alumni back to school plays or concerts, or organise a get together for them like a coffee morning. You could even ask alumni to share their own stories and updates so that you can create an alumni newsletter to share as well.

For example:

St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy have been doing a series of 'Pride of St Margaret's...' posts on their Facebook page, frequently posting a celebration of an alumnus each day.

Tile Cross Academy hosted reunions for the former students of some of their antecedent schools, offering tours of the new school building to show how the school has changed over the years.

What can your alumni offer?

Alumni represent a plethora of education, career and life experiences, and can become a wonderful source of extra knowledge with the key benefit of being relatable to your students through their shared links to your

school. Having built up this network of former students and ensured that they are engaged and interested in school life, you'll now be thinking of how you would like to work with them across the school.

The exciting part of this process is that it's up to you and your colleagues how you work with your alumni, which means that your students can benefit in really interesting and original ways.

To give you an idea, here are a few examples of how schools across the country are working with their alumni:

Soar Valley College in Leicester hosted a series of student drop in events throughout the week. Alumni were invited to talk about their experiences after leaving school during the lunch break.

An alumnus from Robert Clack School returned as a guest speaker in their Year 11 assembly to talk about his career in the civil service.

At City College Norwich, alumni have been invited to take part in an online event where they'll act as virtual guest speakers to discuss wellbeing during Mental Health Awareness Week.

Using former students as relatable role models, trusted mentors and meaningful social capital is a simple but effective way to broaden young people's knowledge of the opportunities available to them, as well as boosting their confidence to pursue these opportunities. As you begin working with your alumni you'll find that the limit to what you can do is really up to your imagination.

For more information on how to work with alumni to impact the confidence, motivation and life chances of young people please contact info@futurefirst.org.uk or call 020 7239 8933