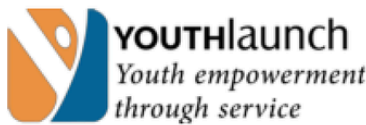


Austin ISD

PALS

Peer Assistance, Leadership, and Service



PALumni:

YouthLaunch Survey Report

September 2025

Introduction

The Peer Assistance Leadership and Service (PALS) program has been a cornerstone of student leadership and mentoring in AISD since 1980. By training high school and middle school students to mentor their younger peers, PALS fosters empathy, confidence, and community-mindedness while strengthening school culture.

Students enroll in PALS as an elective course, which is a curriculum-based program accredited by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). PALS is funded through donations from YouthLaunch.

Funding for PALS is provided by the Buena Vista Foundation and the Kabacoff Family Foundation. For more information on PALS and YouthLaunch, visit the following websites:

<https://www.austinpals.org/>, <https://www.austinisd.org/pals/about>, and <https://www.youthlaunch.org/>.

Throughout this report, the following definitions are used:

- **PALS** are students trained in mentoring, leadership and cooperation by AISD's counseling, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) departments, as well as District-approved outside facilitators. PALS work with students at their own campuses and at feeder schools in their vertical teams to mentor, serve as role models and perform community service.
- **PALumni** are former PALS.
- **PALees** are students who are paired with a trained PAL from a higher grade. PALees typically spend 30-40 minutes per week with their peer mentor.
- **Activities for PALS and PALees** can vary from structured, outcome-oriented activities to less structured play or conversation. PALS and PALees work in their pairs or form bigger groups for games or other activities. PALS and PALees stay on campus during their time together and are subject to school rules and expectations for conduct.

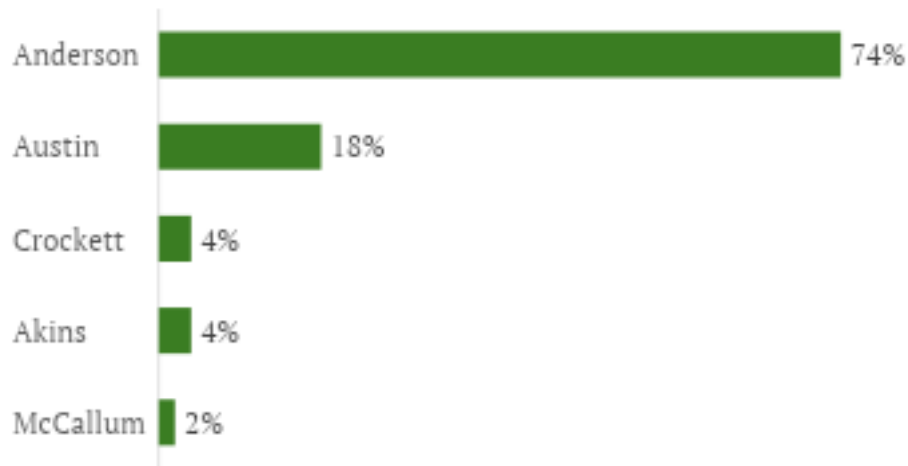
This report shares findings from a 2025 survey of former PALS participants, known as PALumni, designed to capture how the program influenced them during high school and in their lives since graduation. Their responses provide valuable insight into the program's long-term impact on personal growth, career pathways, and ongoing commitment to service.

By combining survey results with reflections, this report highlights what makes PALS unique, what outcomes it sustains, and what opportunities exist to further strengthen the program for future generations of students.

Who participated in the survey?

In total, 57 former PALS responded to the survey, with most respondents having served at Anderson High School (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Of the 57 former PALS responding to the survey, **three quarters served at Anderson High School.**



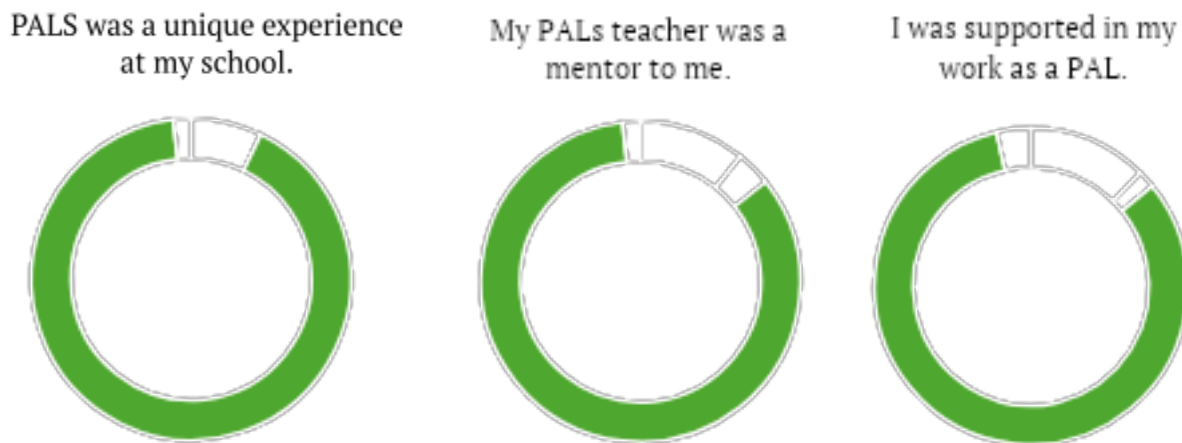
Source. 2025 former PALS survey

Note. There were 57 responses to the survey though responses to each question varied. N counts are included in Appendix A.

What were participants' experiences with PALS?

Participants were asked to respond to questions related their experiences with PALS, the support they felt while serving as a PAL, whether PALS influenced their college and/or career goals, if they have stayed in touch with former PALS and/or PALees, and if they would recommend PALS to their former self. In general, responses to the survey were overwhelmingly positive with nearly all participants agreeing or strongly agreeing to each survey item. For example, **91% of participants strongly agreed that PALS was a unique experience at their school** (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Nearly all former PALS strongly agreed **that PALS was a unique experience at their school, that their PALS teacher was a mentor to them, and that they felt supported in their work as a PAL.**

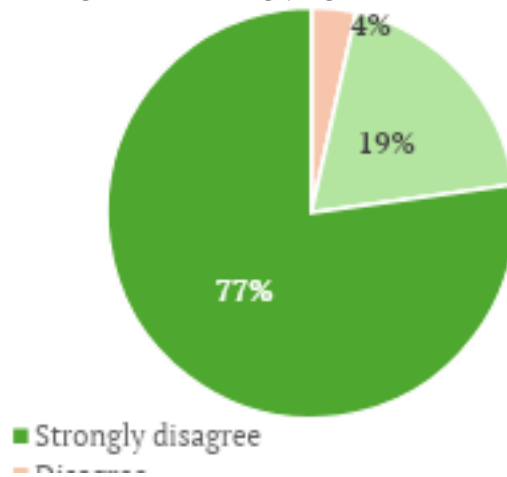


Source. 2025 former PALS survey

Note. The percentage represents the percentage of respondents who *strongly agreed* with each statement. Response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

The goals of PALS were clear and continue to have a positive influence on PALumni. Just over three quarters of former PALS strongly agreed that the goals of PALS was clear. Participants valued the connections they made with each other in addition to their PALees. One participant shared, “The purpose of PALS felt intentionally baked into all aspects of what we did. Every project, activity, and lesson felt cohesive and purposeful. This wasn’t some busy work until the bell rang, this was important work that we were doing as a group.” Another participant shared, “Throughout my time in PALS, I understood the purpose was to [build] connections and provide service to members in my community. I also understood the idea of an unseen ripple effect our work had on the people we worked with. The moments of joy, connection, and regulation during PALS could support a child through the rest of their day. In this way, PALS set them up for successful learning and engagement, the impacts of which would carry on through their education and career.”

Figure 3. Nearly all PALumni agreed or strongly agreed that **the purpose of PALS was clear.**



Examinations of open-ended questions corroborated these positive results with many participants sharing ways that serving as a PAL has helped them in their career or life path today, taught them life lessons beyond high school, and remains a strong part of their character.

PALS is a unique experience. Many participants discussed that PALS was one if – if not the most-memorable high school experience that continues to positively influence their lives. As one PALumni reflected, “PALS is a unique experience for high school students, because it teaches [students] to care about the world beyond their typical exposure. Caring for others, building relationships and mentoring are skills that make any employee a valued asset. PALS is a great experience for our high school students.” Similarly, another former PAL shared that, “PALS was an experience like no other for me in high school. Emily Vowell was and continues to be an influence in my life and had a gift for bringing people together. I’m still friends with many of the people I was in PALS with and reflect fondly upon that time. PALS taught me empathy and compassion. It gave me perspective on my and others lives that I carry with me today.”

“As someone that always knew I wanted to be an educator, I dreamed of being a PAL so that I could connect with younger students, be a mentor, and practice some of the skill sets needed to be a supportive person in their lives. I learned so much from my time in PALS about building connections with my students but also with my fellow PALS and teacher, Ms. Vowell...I am actually still in contact with one of my PALees from 2002-2003...I really feel that PALS was such a transformative experience for me and I hope for my PALees as well. The memories I carry from that time are some of the highlights from my high school career.”

Another former PAL also sang Mrs. Vowell’s praises, sharing, “Mrs. Vowell created a magical space for us to learn and feel safe. That made it possible for us to really make a difference when

we went to elementary schools and middle schools. It was the highlight of my high school experience. I am a teacher in AISD and love how the PAL program is still going strong!”

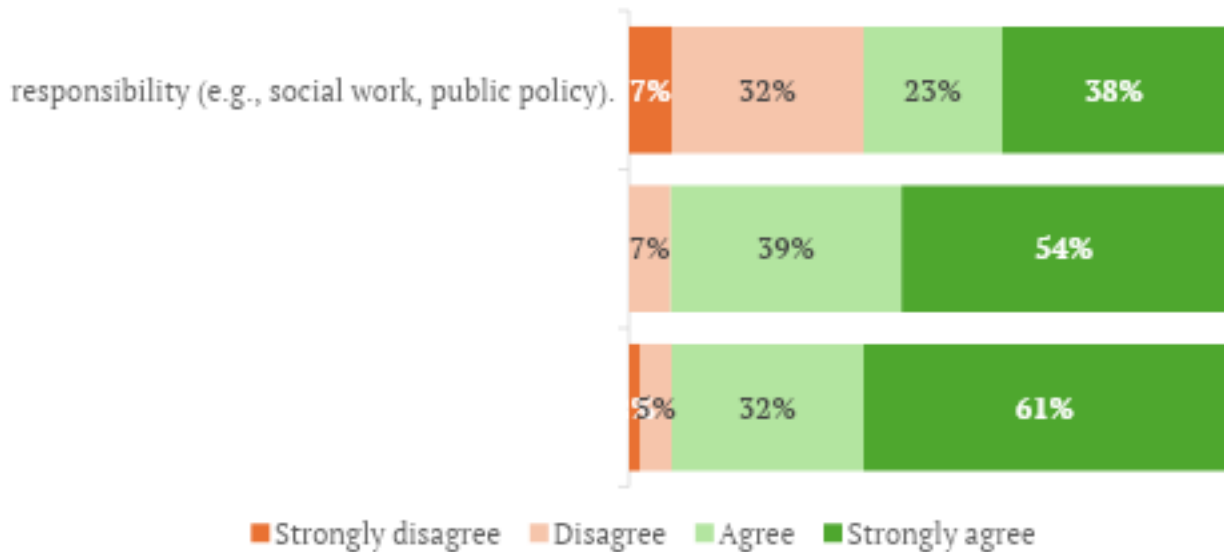
“I never knew if I had the kind of personality that younger students would enjoy being mentored/paired with. I thought I was too dry and boring. But I clicked with my PALees and that started my interest in education that ultimately led me to becoming a certified teacher, the 2020 Austin ISD High School Teacher of the Year, and now the Executive Director of an education non-profit helping break down financial barriers to law school.”

Influence of PALS on career choices. Participants also shared ways in which PALS has contributed to their current career path. As one participant shared, “I became a youth pastor and then a pastor and pals gave me the opportunity to love people in a way that was unique to my high school experience. I was supported and believed in and that transferred to the churches I have served in over the last 15 years. It was one of the major highlights of my high school days.” Similarly, another participant shared that, “PALS established a foundation for my career as a pediatric occupational therapist. PALS provided me with real-world experience in forming connections with people from many different walks of life. In addition to this, PALS provided excellent practice for working as a team. PALS was the only class with an emphasis on connecting with and serving people

directly in my community outside of my school. Now, I see how important this work was, both for the younger students I worked with, and for me as a senior in high school.”

Ongoing connection to the community. Given the emphasis PALS places on community building and seeing mentoring as part of a larger social picture, former PALS were asked to reflect on the degree to which PALS influenced their motivation to work in the community or pursue a degree in social responsibility. Roughly **3 out of 5 respondents strongly agreed that PALS motivated them to work in their community**. Additionally, a little over one third of respondents strongly agreed that PALS motivated them to earn a degree in a field related to social responsibility (Figure 4). Collectively, these responses suggest that PALS has had an influence on high school students’ experiences *beyond* their high school years.

Figure 4. PALumni agreed that **serving as a PAL influenced their decision to work in their community, changed the way they feel about themselves, and motivated them to pursue a degree in social responsibility.**



Source. 2025 former PALS survey

In their open-ended responses, participants shared how PALS helped them connect with their community. For example, one participant shared that they “didn’t have confidence that I would make a team or be the smartest in my class (wasn’t good at sports and not top academic.). PALS was the first thing to show me that my heart and caring about others and my community mattered.” Another participant shared, “Looking back, I see so many parallels and foundational skills shared with PALS and my current career. PALS gave me great experience in building rapport and relationships with kids, which is now something I do every day. In a world where so many people feel alone, I think creating service communities that offer connection benefits everyone. This kind of work, PALS included, is always something I’d want to be a part of, and is something I think all young people would benefit from.” Another PALumni believed that PALS “was validation that my passion mattered outside of babysitting or tutoring. It supported the vision that was starting to take shape and reminded me of the power that community and service hold.”

“[PALS] showed me to appreciate my true gifts. I remember a time when an elementary student assigned to a [student] in our group refused to speak...Instead of talking more, I took the opposite approach and told her we didn't have to talk. I'd stay with her and just sit. We sat in silence for a full session or two. But one day, she spoke! Turned out she was from a large family and got drowned out a lot. Ultimately, we

PALS strengthens internal growth. Open-ended comments reflected these sentiments. For example, one participant shared that “The program built confidence in me to make a difference in someone else's life, which made a positive difference in mine.” PALumni discussed

that participating in PALS increased their confidence and learning how to lean into their strengths. One participant shared that PALS “changed the way I think about myself because I had more confidence and it made feel good to help other kids.” Another participant shared that “The leadership training aspect of PALS helped me to be able to mentally view situations from an external place that allowed for better communication and understanding of the situation. This gave me confidence as a leader and self-confidence over where I have gifts/skills and where I may have weak spots.” Another participant believed that PALS “shaped my view of myself as a potential leader. PALS also showed me the value of my ability to connect with others. Many times in my work today, and during my work as a PAL, I met people who faced challenges outside of their control. As a PAL, I had no ability to change or impact their circumstances, but I could provide a consistent source of connection.” Similarly, another participant shared that PALS “instilled a confidence I didn’t know I was missing by pushing me out of my comfort zone and showing me the impact I could have on others. Through mentoring and meaningful conversations, I learned to trust myself, speak up, and lead with empathy.”

Most PALumni still engage in community service and mentoring. Survey participants were next asked if they still engage in community work and/or mentoring. Importantly, **nearly all PALumni** (89%; Figure 5) **continue to engage in service work since their time as a PAL**. A similar percentage (86%; Figure 5) also **continue to find ways to mentor others**. Again, these results suggest that PALS continue to find ways to engage with their community through volunteering in their community or mentoring others.

Figure 5. Most **PALumni continue to engage in service work and mentoring** after high school.



Source. 2025 former PALS survey

Note. The percentage represents the percentage of respondents who *strongly agreed* with each statement. Response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

Examinations of participants' open-ended responses speak to the ongoing influence of PALS on participants' relationship with their community and with others around them. As one participant shared, "In general, I'd say public school education is very inwardly focused - your activities, your grades, your college acceptance...PALS is one of the few experiences that help teenagers see the big picture of the world and what it means to be in community with and of service to others. It also brought the opportunity to get to know our peers on a deeper level - many of us were struggling with our own issues & it was a supportive program that let kids from across different cliques in school see each others humanity." Another participant shared, "our mentor worked incredibly purposefully in creating community within our PAL group so that we could carry that on to the students that we worked with." Finally, another PALumni believed that PALS "develops social skills which otherwise cannot easily be obtained at school and allows [participants] to make an active difference in our community."

Finally, PALumni were asked if they have kept in contact with former PALS and PALees. Just under **two-thirds of former PALS are still in contact with a former PAL**, while only 19% of former PALS are still in contact with their PALees (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Most **PALumni have remained in contact with former PALS, PALees, and/or PALS teachers** after high school.



Source. 2025 former PALS survey

Note. The percentage represents the percentage of respondents who *strongly agreed* with each statement. Response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

PALS fosters lasting bonds in PALS teachers, PALS, and PALees. In reviewing open-ended responses found several comments relating to the strong bond participants felt with each other, their former PALees, and their PALS teacher. For example, a participant shared that they “have stayed in contact with one of my PALees. We connected on social media and have actually also seen each other in person a couple of times. When I

“My PALS teacher is still part of my life today and I am 46 years old. That should tell you plenty about how it impacted in my life. Emily Vowell never answered any question I asked because she always knew I had the answer already within me. That is one major thing that changed my life. I still think about that today when I have a question!”

was her PAL, she had just moved to America from Syria. We have stayed in touch on and off and love seeing what each of us is doing, how our families have grown, etc.” One participant shared that they have stayed connected to their PALS teacher: “Ms Vowell established relationships built on trust and authenticity. We are still in contact 25 years later.” One former PAL said that they “I see many of [my PALees] annually and speak to them regularly.” Others shared that they stay connected over social media platforms. Some participants shared that they were still in connection with other individuals who served in PALS, stating, “Since high school I’ve ended up in friend groups with people who were PALS at other schools in the Austin-area, which makes it so much more clear that PALS attracts great people and makes them even better.”

“ABSOLUTELY 100%. It was such a wonderful experience and really helped me reiterate what I wanted to do career-wise (work with young kids) and also helped me build leadership skills, connect with classmates I might not have otherwise, and more.”

PALumni overwhelmingly recommend PALS. Finally, participants were asked if they would recommend PALS to their younger selves. 100% of PALumni whole-heartily agreed that they would. Responses ranged from simple “YES!!!” to “100%” to longer heart-felt reflections. One PALumni shared, “I

would without a doubt recommend becoming a PAL to my younger self. It was hands-down the most meaningful experience I had throughout my entire time in high school. It provided me with friendships, skills, empathy, personal-growth, and the joy of serving those around me.” Another participant shared, “Yes, it was a supportive environment that I honestly wish more individuals had in their school experience. High school can be very isolating and PALS made it less so.” Another former PAL shared that PALS was “PALS was a great experience that taught me a lot about myself and my community. It also opened up my interests in working with children, which was only introduced because all my PALS were elementary aged. I recommended PALS to both of my sisters when they entered high school and now they are involved in the organization as well.”

“I would without a doubt recommend becoming a PAL to my younger self. It was hands-down the most meaningful experience I had throughout my entire time in high school. It provided me with friendships, skills, empathy, personal-growth, and the joy of serving those around me.”

Conclusion

Findings from the Former PALS Survey highlight the profound and lasting impact of the Peer Assistance Leadership and Service (PALS) program. Former participants consistently described PALS as a unique and transformative experience—one that not only shaped their high school years but also influenced their personal growth, career choices, and lifelong commitment to service. The overwhelming majority of respondents reported feeling supported in their roles, developed confidence as leaders, and cultivated empathy and compassion that continue to guide their professional and personal lives.

Importantly, many former PALS remain engaged in community service and mentoring today, underscoring the enduring value of the skills and perspectives gained through the program. While some maintain ties with their PALees and fellow PALS, nearly all respondents reflected on the deep connections fostered with peers and teachers as central to their experience. The stories shared illustrate how PALS empowered students to recognize their strengths, step into leadership roles, and carry forward a sense of responsibility to their communities.

It is important to note that while findings were overwhelmingly positive, it is important to note that the sample size was small and concentrated at certain schools. It is quite possible that individuals who elected to participate in the survey were those who held a positive image of PALS rather than individuals who had a less positive experience with PALS. Future surveys should aim for broader participation to better capture the diversity of PALS’ experiences across

AISD. Planned interviews might help get at some potential challenges and opportunities for growth associated with PALS.

In short, PALS is not only an elective course but also a formative experience that equips students with lifelong skills and a commitment to service. The evidence from former participants affirms the program's ongoing relevance and power to inspire future generations of student leaders.

Implications & Recommendations

Findings from the Former PALS Survey reaffirm the lasting influence of the program on students' personal growth, career pathways, and community engagement. These results point to several opportunities to strengthen and sustain the program:

1. Continue Investing in Teacher Mentors

- Former PALS repeatedly highlighted the role of their PALS teacher as central to their growth. Ensuring teachers have strong training, resources, and recognition will be critical to maintaining program quality.

2. Highlight Career and Leadership Outcomes

- Many alumni connected their PALS experience to careers in education, counseling, ministry, and service-oriented fields. Documenting and sharing these pathways can inspire current students and strengthen the case for program funding.

3. Build Alumni Engagement

- A majority of former PALS continue service or mentoring work, but fewer stay connected to their PALeers. Creating an alumni network (e.g., newsletters, mentorship opportunities, social media groups) could deepen long-term connections and create new support for current students.

4. Strengthen Community Partnerships

- Alumni stories underscore how PALS fosters empathy, confidence, and community-mindedness. Partnering with local organizations could expand opportunities for PALs to apply these skills beyond school campuses.
- Lean on former PALS who work in these spheres to build and strengthen community relationships.

5. Share Success Stories Strategically

- The powerful alumni testimonials can be repurposed for training, recruitment, and fundraising. Highlighting these voices can help staff and partners see the ripple effects of the program.

Appendix A. Number of respondents per school

School	N
Akins	2
Anderson	42
Austin	10
Crockett	2
McCallum	1

Appendix B. Former PALS survey questions

Former HS (drop down)

1. Serving as a PAL when I was in High School motivated me to pursue work in my community.
Scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)
2. Serving as a Pal when I was in High School motivated me to earn a degree in a field related to social responsibility (e.g., social work, public policy).
Scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)
3. PALS was a unique experience at my school.
Scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)
4. I was supported in my work as a PAL. (If not, why? Open-ended)
Scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)
5. My PALS teacher was a mentor to me. (If not, why? Open-ended)
Scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)
6. I have engaged in service work since my time as a PAL in High School.
Y/N; If Y -> please explain what type of service work you have engaged in: (open text)
7. I continue to find ways to mentor others.
Y/N; If Y -> Please explain other ways you have mentored others: (open text)
8. I have remained in close contact with other PALS I have served with:
Y/N; If Y -> Share some connections you have maintained and why these connections continue to be important to you: (open text)
9. I have remained in contact with one or more of my PALees:
Y/N; If Y -> Please share some ways your PALee has continued to have an influence in your life: (open text)
10. Would you recommend becoming a PAL to your younger self and why? (open text)
11. Please describe your current job, or if in school, please describe the degree you are seeking: (open text)
12. Highest degree earned (select from list -> High school/GED, BA/BS, MA, PhD)
13. Field of study (open text field)
14. Is there anything else you would like us to know about your time serving as a PAL?