

# PRESS RELEASE

## IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### A hard look at education through canine eyes

15-year-old Caleb\* is one of hundreds of young people re-engaging with their studies thanks to Paw Pals, an animal-assisted education program from MacKillop Family Services (MacKillop).

The agency, which specialises in trauma-informed services for children, offers trained therapy dogs and program facilitators to support those struggling in mainstream schools.

“Children respond to a compassionate wet nose,” laughs Paw Pals Ambassador and TV personality, Lara Shannon. “The program is trauma-informed and much more than bringing a dog to school, but if you’ve ever melted when looking at a pair of soft brown eyes, you will understand why Paw Pals works.

“Dogs have an innate sense of responding to human emotion, body language and needs,” says the host of three canine shows on Australian TV. “When children meet MacKillop’s Paw Pals, it’s the start of getting back in touch with their education.”

Paw Pals is aimed at helping young people re-engage with studies and fulfill their potential. In the process it keeps them from contributing to the following statistics:

- **One in five Australian students do not finish Year 12<sup>1</sup>**
- **1 in 3 young people who leave school early are not in work or study<sup>2</sup>**
- **Taxpayers will pay \$616,200 on average for each student (over their lifetime) who does not complete Year 12<sup>3</sup>**

MacKillop’s Paw Pals program is keeping kids in school, and re-engaging students in their learning. Paw Pals costs \$220 for a one-to-one session, or \$374 for a school group session reaching up to eight students.

MacKillop is calling on the community to support the program in its current [Paw Pals appeal](#), so

more students can be reached before they become another statistic.

The Paw Pals program has operated for six years and, in that time, has grown to 20 therapy dogs and 15 facilitators supporting kids struggling in school across Melbourne, Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat.

“With the support from the community, we have been able to help over 1300 kids,” says Brona Walsh, MacKillop’s Education and Engagement Program Director. “With their ongoing support, we hope to be able to meet current demand which far exceeds capacity, and continue to grow the program,” she says.

For Caleb, who lives with trauma and is autistic, the classroom was a sensory landmine. Until he met Paw Pal Luna and her facilitator, Mel.

Watching Luna’s body language and what the facilitator did to help her rest and refocus helped Caleb understand what he needed to do to deal with stress and how to calm down.

“Paw Pals helps to improve students’ confidence, self-regulation and behavioural management skills,” explains Brona, “and for them, it begins by interacting with the dogs.”

Last year, Ballarat Community Health funded seven Paw Pals Programs in six different schools, tailored to the specific needs of students at each school.

“The Paw Pals program has continuously shown over the years to be effective in addressing student chronic absenteeism and disengagement, essentially with the most vulnerable students,” says Isla Ford, Coordinator at Ballarat Community Health.

“The dedication of the Paw Pals team, combined with the unique and evidence-based approach, makes this program an invaluable resource for schools and youth services. I highly recommend Paw Pals to any school or organisation looking to enhance student wellbeing and engagement.”

Paw Pals relies on community funding through the annual Paw Pals Appeal. Petstock Foundation is a major partner of the appeal and is joined by supporting partners Catholic Development Fund, Queensland Gives, iCare Staffing and Woolworths at Work.

**Those wishing to help prevent over 400 young people from dropping out of school are invited to find out more and support the program at [pawpalsappeal.org.au](http://pawpalsappeal.org.au)**

*\*Name changed for privacy*

- 1 *Australian Productivity Commission (2024). Report on Government Services 2024-4. School Education.*
- 2 *The Smith Family 2024. Pathways, engagement and transitions report 3. 2024.*
- 3 *(\$616,200 covers loss of earnings, lower quality of life, private health costs and more for each student who doesn't complete Year 12 or similar) Source: Lam and Huo, 2018*

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