



Review of Auditor- General's Report 1: 2012—Improving student attendance

Report No. 7
Education and Innovation Committee
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Education and Innovation Committee

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Chair's foreword

The Auditor-General's Report 1: 2012 – Improving student attendance is one of the first performance audits undertaken by the Auditor-General under changes made to the *Auditor-General Act 2009* that came into effect in 2011.

A performance audit looks at the performance of public sector entities to assess how effectively, efficiently and economically their objectives are being met. In this case, the objective set by the former Department of Education and Training (now the Department of Education, Training and Employment) was to improve student attendance rates by 1% statewide; and to close the gap in attendance rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2013. The performance audit considered whether the strategies and initiatives put in place to achieve these goals have been effective.

While the Auditor-General found that these had not been successful, in that the statewide target was not met, it must be said that looking below the statewide rates there have clearly been some effective strategies and initiatives implemented. Attendance rates have improved, in some schools and in some areas. They have declined in others. An issue would seem to be that the target being set at a statewide level masks the improvements in attendance rates. In addition, a lack of evidence linking initiatives and strategies to improvements poses some difficulties in determining the success or otherwise.

The Committee considered the Auditor-General's report with great interest and the Committee's report not only discusses the Auditor-General's findings and recommendations, but gives further consideration to matters touched on by the Auditor-General but on which recommendations were not made, perhaps because they were beyond the scope of the performance audit. They are however matters of public interest and, having been raised in the report, are within the scope of this Committee's considerations.

We as a Committee commend the Auditor-General and the department for together, agreeing this was an important area for a performance audit, and the department for using it to inform the way forward as it continues to tackle this important issue. We thank the department officials, the Auditor-General and officials from his office who briefed the committee on matters raised in the Auditor-General's report.

I would like to thank all members of the Education and Innovation Committee for their commitment to continuing to develop knowledge of our portfolio areas.

I commend the report to the House.



Mrs Rosemary Menkens MP

Chair

August, 2012

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Minister for Education, Training and Employment advise the House on the government's acceptance or otherwise of, and the implementation plans relating to, the recommendations made by the Auditor-General in his report 1: 2012 – Improving student attendance.

Recommendation 2

That the Parliament note the Committee's intent to review state school attendance rates in 2014.

Recommendation 3

That the department consider undertaking and publishing a comprehensive evaluation of the many initiatives and strategies underway that include a goal of improving student attendance rates in Queensland.

Recommendation 4

That the Minister for Education, Training and Employment advise on any changes that might be made to evaluation and reporting processes for the *Closing the Gap* Strategy as it relates to school attendance rates.

1 Introduction

1.1 Role of the Committee

The Queensland Parliament's Education and Innovation Committee commenced on 18 May 2012. It consists of government and non-government members of Parliament, and it has responsibility for the portfolio areas of education, training, employment, science, information technology, innovation and the arts.¹

Portfolio committees support the Parliament to fulfil its functions. A key function of the Parliament is to hold the government to account. One way that committees support this function is by considering the integrity, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the government's financial management by examining government financial documents and considering the annual and other reports of the Auditor-General.² Committees then report back to the Parliament on their considerations, informing debate and ultimately, the decisions of the Parliament.

1.2 Role of the Auditor-General

The role of the Auditor-General is provided in the *Auditor-General Act 2009* (the Act) and includes conducting performance audits of public sector entities and audits of performance management systems of government owned corporations.³

A performance audit evaluates whether an agency or government program is achieving its objectives effectively, economically and efficiently, and is compliant with relevant legislation. It does not consider the merits of government policy. Rather, it focuses on how that policy is implemented.

The Auditor-General may prepare a report on any audit conducted under the Act and table it in the Legislative Assembly.

Standing Orders require that the Committee of the Legislative Assembly refer an Auditor-General report to the relevant portfolio committee as soon as practicable after it has been tabled.⁴

1.3 Review process

The Auditor-General Report 1:2012 - *Improving Student Attendance* ('the Auditor-General's report') was tabled in the Legislative Assembly on 17 May 2012 and referred to the Committee by the Committee of the Legislative Assembly on 29 May 2012. The Committee has reviewed the report, including the response from the Director-General, Department of Education, Training and Employment (the department) which was published with the report.

To further inform the Committee, representatives from the Queensland Audit Office, including the Auditor-General, briefed the Committee on 6 June 2012. Representatives from the department, including the Director-General, briefed the Committee on 20 June 2012.

1.4 Audit overview

The Auditor-General conducted a performance audit to assess the effectiveness of the former Department of Education and Training's (DET)⁵ strategies and initiatives to increase state school

¹ Standing Rules and Orders of the Legislative Assembly, Legislative Assembly of Queensland, Schedule 6

² *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001* section 94(1)(a)

³ *Auditor-General Act 2009* s 37A and 38

⁴ Standing Rules and Orders of the Legislative Assembly, 194B

⁵ DET was restructured and renamed in April 2012, to the Department of Education, Training and Employment.

attendance rates. The objective of a performance audit is to decide whether the objectives of public sector entities are being achieved economically, efficiently and effectively and in compliance with all relevant laws.⁶

The audit was conducted from September to December 2011. The department's approach, policy, and the guidance and support provided to schools were examined. The methods and processes for monitoring and reporting of student attendance by state schools and through the department were also examined.

Eight individual schools were audited as part of the audit process.

The department's strategic and operational plans from 2009 to the present include targets to increase attendance rates by 1%, and to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates by 2013.

The statewide *Every Day Counts* initiative commenced in 2008. It is an awareness raising initiative, designed to change parent, community and student attitudes to school attendance.

Every Day Counts promotes four key messages:

- all children should be enrolled at school and attend on every school day
- schools should monitor, communicate and implement strategies to improve regular school attendance
- truanting can place a student in unsafe situations and impact on their future employability and life choices
- attendance at school is the responsibility of everyone in the community.

As well, the department has a range of policies, procedures and guidelines for schools to follow in respect of student attendance, in line with its broader legislative provisions under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*.⁷

Attendance rates⁸ have remained relatively stable since the *Every Day Counts* initiative was introduced in 2008. At that time, the department set a target of improving school attendance by 1% per year.

The target was not achieved. From a statewide attendance rate in 2008 of 91.1%, the 2011 rate had decreased to 90.0%. There was no change in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates, and no indication that the gap will be closed by 2013.

The key finding of the Auditor-General was that the targets had not been achieved and that without a specific action plan that has clear actions, timeframes, budget or assignment of responsibility, and without evaluation of key elements of such a plan, the department cannot demonstrate how it will meet its targets.⁹

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Auditor-General report contains a number of findings, makes recommendations about systems, and highlights some case studies of strategies individual schools are using to address unsatisfactory attendance.

⁶ *Auditor-General Act 2009* s 37A(3)

⁷ AG report, pp10-11

⁸ Student attendance rates provide the average percentage of school days attended per school, region and the whole state. The rate is based on semester one each year and is calculated by dividing the number of school days attended by each student (including part days), by the total number of days available for attendance.

⁹ *Ibid*, p33

Findings include:

- There is no specific action plan that has clear actions, timeframes, budget or assignment of responsibility.¹⁰ Without such a plan, the department cannot demonstrate how it will achieve its target to improve school attendance rates by 1% each year.¹¹
- Efforts to achieve the 1% improvement rely on schools achieving local targets by using local strategies, initiatives and community resources.¹²
- The statewide attendance rate in Queensland in 2011 was 90%. It has not improved, and has in fact declined from 91% since the *Every Day Counts* initiative commenced in 2008.
- There are some clear patterns in respect of attendance rates, including a decrease through Years 8 and 9 to a low of 87% by Year 10; and an Indigenous attendance rate of around 7% lower than for non-Indigenous students, unchanged since 2008.
- Schools manage unsatisfactory attendance – that is, follow the department's policies and procedures in respect of recording, analysing and following up attendance data - inconsistently. This impacts on a school's ability to determine and respond to underlying causes of absence, identify chronic absenteeism, and report accurately on attendance rates.¹³
- Proactive efforts to improve attendance rates are focused on schools with low attendance rates, rather than on individual students. So, a student with chronic absenteeism at a school with a high attendance rate will not necessarily be identified or managed.
- The effectiveness of using the current legislated process to enforce parents' obligations to send their children to school (involving contact, letters, notices, referral to police) cannot be assessed due to a lack of data. However less than a third of principals surveyed through the audit thought that the process was effective. The culmination of the process – prosecution – is not often used, with only three persons referred to police and two persons charged in 2011.

The Auditor-General's **recommendations** are that the Department of Education, Training and Employment:

- Revise its guidance, procedures and systems to include a definition of unsatisfactory attendance, a consistent approach for schools to manage and track actions follow up unexplained absences and a consistent approach to manage and track interventions of unsatisfactory attendance;
- Increase the range of OneSchool reports to help schools identify and monitor students with attendance below a state-wide minimum standard of attendance;
- Provide schools with access to a range of materials and evidence-based strategies to increase attendance and case manage chronically absent students;
- Assess how effective the process to enforce the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* is in increasing attendance;
- Revise performance measures to include a focus on chronically absent students and publicly report progress against all student attendance performance measures; and

¹⁰ AG report, p33

¹¹ Ibid, pp2 and 33

¹² Ibid, p33

¹³ Ibid, pp2

- Improve the quality of student attendance data by:
 - updating the data dictionary to cover all performance measures relating to attendance;
 - logging changes made to the student attendance data at the database level;
 - verifying changes made to the student attendance data outside of the source system are also made to the source system data.

2 Issues considered by the Committee

The Committee broadly supports the recommendations made by the Auditor-General. In reviewing the Auditor-General's report the Committee gave further consideration to the following areas:

- DETE Action Plan
- Follow up audit
- School, community and family responsibility
- Evaluation
- Satisfactory attendance threshold
- Penalising parents

2.1 General comments

The Auditor-General's recommendations focus on the systemic issues. The Committee's deliberations included some broader questions including the effectiveness of particular strategies (given that some of these were also highlighted in the report) and whether specific population groups might warrant attention in respect of school attendance rates.

Given the Auditor-General's jurisdiction, the audit focused only on state schools. While noting it might be beyond the remit of the Auditor-General, the Committee would be interested to see comparative data and be informed about strategies used within the Catholic and independent school systems.

Indigenous students are identified by the department as being at educational disadvantage, and because of the department's target and *Closing the Gap* strategy, were in scope for the Auditor-General's report. The Committee would be interested to see data that might indicate whether other groups experiencing educational disadvantage, such as students with a disability¹⁴ or students from culturally diverse backgrounds might also warrant specific strategies to improve their attendance rates.

The Auditor-General's focus is on the achievement or otherwise of the department's targets – a 1% improvement in attendance rates at the statewide level and 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates by 2013.

A central finding of the Auditor-General was that without a specific action plan that has clear actions, timeframes, budget or assignment of responsibility, the department cannot demonstrate how it will meet its goal of a 1% improvement in attendance rates each year.¹⁵ The Committee notes the department's advice that it does have a statewide strategy which includes its law, policies and procedures, a requirement that schools set and report on targets, and a data management system. It also advised that it is currently developing an action plan which will address the Auditor-General's recommendations. However, the department has some concerns about the recommendation that it

¹⁴ Queensland Government, Office of the Public Advocate, *Annual Report 2012-2011*, pp60-61

¹⁵ Ibid, p33

define a level of unsatisfactory attendance which would 'trigger' action. Its position is that 'Every Day Counts' – therefore a 100% attendance rate is the target.¹⁶ This would not be an effective trigger for action.

The department points out that measuring success at the statewide level is difficult because of the varying conditions and multiple causes of unsatisfactory attendance rates around the state.¹⁷ The Committee acknowledges the importance in that context of individualised responses to students, and local responses and initiatives implemented by individual schools and communities. While interstate comparisons may require a statewide attendance rate, perhaps internal strategies and communications should focus more on rates and targets at the regional rather than statewide level.

The department also set a target to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student attendance rates by 2013. Since the *Closing the Gap Education Strategy* commenced in 2009 until 2011, the attendance rate of Indigenous students remained on average 7% lower than that of non-Indigenous students. The Auditor-General found that while the *Closing the Gap* strategy contains specific initiatives, funding, tailored regional targets and an annual evaluation report, that evaluation report does not assess how effective the relevant individual strategies are in achieving improved attendance.¹⁸ The Committee notes that unless there are additional evaluations occurring at the local level, this would suggest that the various initiatives are not and cannot be informed by evidence as to what might make them more effective.

While local and/or regional initiatives and individualised responses are the key to improving attendance rates – and several of these are highlighted in the Auditor-General's report – the Committee is of the view that systemic approaches to identifying, managing and responding to unsatisfactory attendance are required to support school staff. Providing a structure also increases the likelihood of a response; allows for comparison, benchmarking and target-setting; and makes it easier to collaborate with other agencies that operate at a higher level (such as police, health, community services, other levels of government).

The Auditor-General's report also considers the legislated process for enforcing school attendance; and recommends that the department assess how effective the process to enforce the Act is in increasing attendance. While the legislated process is reflected in departmental policies and procedures (that is, to make contact with parents, followed by written communications, culminating in referral for prosecution and potential court imposition of penalties), and would seem to be followed through the first few stages of the process, few prosecutions are actually made. Further investigation into why the process is not completed could be quite timely and lead to legislative change, as is happening in other jurisdictions. There are current moves in Victoria to make changes to its legislative processes in respect of school attendance, which would see schools able to fine parents directly without reference to the police or courts; and in New South Wales, a range of options other than fines exist, such as Compulsory Schooling Orders issued by the Children's Court.

However, to go beyond the scope of the Auditor-General's report for a moment, the Committee would like to comment that while legislative responses to unsatisfactory school attendance place the obligation on parents to ensure their children go to school, they are only one part of the picture. Responding to unsatisfactory attendance requires a whole of community response, with schools and parents playing a central role. Reasons for non-attendance at school go beyond truancy to include illness, disability, economic disadvantage (for example not being able to afford petrol, bus fare,

¹⁶ Hansard, DETE, p3

¹⁷ Hansard, DETE, p3

¹⁸ AG Report, p33

or lunch, and embarrassment about asking for assistance)¹⁹, bullying, violence in the home, responsibility to care for other family members, or family holidays – as well as parental apathy. Legislative processes which aim to “enforce” attendance – such as those provided under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2002*, which culminate in prosecution as a last resort – may be appropriate where parental apathy or decision-making is the cause of poor attendance.

Clearly though, a range of other responses should be (and are being) explored, because there are many other causes of poor attendance. Because of the range of causes, the Committee would question the Auditor-General's suggestion that a school might “address the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism.”²⁰ While schools might be expected to recognise causes, develop initiatives that respond to those causes, and to make appropriate referrals to support services, the Committee sees addressing the causes (with the exception of school-related causes) to be beyond the scope of a school.

The Committee believes part of the solution to unsatisfactory attendance is to target parental and community attitudes, and in this respect the Committee commends the department for the intent of its *Every Day Counts* initiative. All Committee members have examples from their electorates of schools and communities who are working together to identify and respond to truancy, with a range of innovative responses that respond to local contexts, and commend these schools and communities for their efforts.

2.2 DETE action plan

The department has advised that it accepts all of the recommendations either in full or partially, and is preparing an action plan to implement them.²¹ The Committee understands that the department is still considering the recommendation that it set a threshold attendance rate for individual students that would trigger action. At present an absence of more than three days is a trigger for action. The department is aiming to achieve the purpose of the Auditor-General's recommendation - creating a trigger for action (presumably, to investigate the reason for non-attendance) - without creating an unintended message to schools, students or parents that any unsatisfactory attendance by a student below that trigger point was acceptable. This is discussed further in 2.6 below.

Development of the action plan is underway so the Committee is not in a position to comment on it. Given the Auditor-General's report was to the Parliament, it is appropriate for the Parliament to be kept informed of plans to address it. Consequently the Committee recommends the responsible Minister provide that information to the Parliament.

Recommendation 1

That the Minister for Education, Training and Employment advise the House by 30 November 2012 on the Government's acceptance or otherwise of, and the implementation plans relating to, the recommendations made by the Auditor-General in his report 1: 2012 – Improving student attendance.

¹⁹ Example cited in Dickson, Elizabeth A & Hutchinson, Terry C, 2012. *Truancy and the Law in Australia: the Queensland example*. *International Journal of Law and Education*, 15 (2) p87

²⁰ AG report, p3

²¹ Hansard, DETE, p2

2.3 Follow-up review

The tabling of the Auditor-General's report in May 2012 resulted in considerable media interest, including publication of several news stories and opinion pieces. The Committee intends to review the issue of student attendance rates in Queensland state schools again in 2014.

In keeping with a portfolio committee's core function of supporting Parliament to hold executive government to account, a review in 2014 will inform the public (through the Parliament) about whether there have been any significant changes resulting from implementation of the Auditor-General's 2012 recommendations, or from other strategies that might be implemented by the department or individual schools; and would help to ensure student attendance rates – fundamental determinants of outcomes at both the individual and broader socio-economic levels – remain a priority. A review could also provide an opportunity for stakeholder input on the issue and suggest matters for government consideration.

Recommendation 2

That the Parliament note the Committee's intent to review state school attendance rates in 2014.

2.4 School, community and family responsibility

The Auditor-General's report emphasises that parents have the primary responsibility and legal obligation to ensure children attend school. The role for schools in the legislated enforcement process is to identify, monitor and respond to unsatisfactory student attendance. It is arguable that without a definition of unsatisfactory attendance, schools, parents and police are not always in a clear position when it comes to fulfilling their legal obligations.

The Committee notes that attendance rates are at their lowest for Year 10 students who are generally aged 15-16 years.²² Lower attendance rates for that age group is consistent around the nation. This population is approaching the minimum school leaving age which can be a key transition point for young people, and is considered to be a high risk time for disengagement from education. Disengagement with education has significant implications for individual, community and economic outcomes. Schools now offer a range of transition pathways for this group, including vocational education and training (VET) in schools, and school-based apprenticeships.

If there are multiple determinants of unsatisfactory school attendance rates, then improving those rates is not solely the responsibility of parents or schools. It is a community and societal responsibility, and initiatives that engage the broader community will be part of the solution. The Committee is aware of many local level initiatives that aim to respond to truancy (one cause of unsatisfactory attendance) including 'Schools In' in North Queensland and the 'Beenleigh Together Against Truancy' program where local businesses are encouraged to call schools when they see children not at school who on the face of it, should be; and anecdotally, some cinema and shopping centre managers have arrangements with local schools to exclude children of school age during school hours.

Similarly, referring families who are having difficulties in getting children to school to appropriate support services is extending the notion of community and societal responsibility. This broadening of community responsibility, raising as it does the whole community's awareness of the importance of school attendance, would seem to be an essential part of any response to unsatisfactory attendance.

²² AG report, p17

2.5 Evaluation

Evaluation of the range of initiatives, many of which anecdotally are having great effect on attendance rates, seems to be an issue. The department requires schools to review the effectiveness of their strategies themselves every three or four years as part of their own strategic review processes.²³ An independent evaluation would create an evidence base that would inform replication and broader implementation of what works. The report advises that DET did evaluate the effect of 10 local initiatives on attendance rates from 2009-10 and that the case studies are available on the department's website. However the Committee was not able to find any evaluation reports. It did find five case studies to which the department referred during its briefing of the Committee. The department advised that it was working to expand the case studies and to have policies and procedures which refer schools to that information, as part of the action plan currently being developed in response to the Auditor-General's report.²⁴ But case studies are not the same as evaluations.

The Auditor-General found that other than some awareness raising material from 2008 and some case studies on the *Every Day Counts* website, there are minimal evidence-based, statewide programs that schools can adopt (or adapt) to manage the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism. While there are many initiatives at the school level, the Committee suggests that in addition to sharing case studies, an analysis of to what extent and why the various initiatives work would be very helpful. The department did indicate that research on patterns, research and strategies in respect of attendance rates would be disseminated to schools in 2012.²⁵

The Committee notes that under the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities, Queensland receives funding from the Commonwealth Government to improve the quality and quantity of education received by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A key aim of the NPA is that 'All children are engaged in and benefiting from schooling', with the performance indicator the proportion of children enrolled in and attending school. If, as research suggests, there is a correlation between lower school attendance rates and lower socio-economic status²⁶, improvements in attendance rates might be expected to be seen in schools funded under the NPA. The government and non-government schools funded under the NPA in Queensland have considerable autonomy to develop their own responses to achieve the NPA outcomes.

The NPA, as well as the Cape York Welfare Reform trials, the Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) pilots in Queensland schools, and individual school and community initiatives must be creating some very rich data that with cohesive evaluation, could better inform schools as to what works. This could support broader, perhaps more efficient, implementation of what are now local initiatives.

Recommendation 3

That the department consider undertaking and publishing a comprehensive evaluation of the many initiatives and strategies underway that include a goal of improving student attendance rates in Queensland.

²³ Ibid, p35

²⁴ Hansard, p5

²⁵ AG Report, p32

²⁶ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, January 2012. *Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM), Evaluation Report for 2010*, p1

The Auditor-General reported that progress reports on the *Closing the Gap* strategy, which contained statewide and locally negotiated evidence-based initiatives and was supported by funding, do not assess the effectiveness of the strategies themselves in contributing towards achieving the target. This means schools are unable to use the reports to identify what works, for use in their own schools.²⁷ The Committee would also suggest that if that is the case, it also means the department cannot readily identify the effectiveness of the funding it allocates under *Closing the Gap*.

In respect of the progress report as a source of information sharing, the Committee would hope that schools are able to see what works by other means than the *Closing the Gap* report, for example through sharing of best practice amongst colleagues across a range of mediums and mechanisms established for that purpose.

Recommendation 4

That the Minister for Education, Training and Employment advise on any changes that might be made to evaluation and reporting processes for the *Closing the Gap* Strategy as it relates to school attendance rates.

2.6 Satisfactory attendance threshold

The legislated process to enforce student attendance requires that unsatisfactory attendance be identified, and a reason for it identified.

Current procedure and guidance for schools does not set a minimum standard of attendance that can be used to identify unsatisfactory attendance and trigger a response (which would presumably be a response consistent with the legislated enforcement process that begins with making contact with parents). The Auditor-General highlighted the importance of having a clear definition of unsatisfactory attendance to ensure that relevant students are identified and supported. The Committee notes that other jurisdictions do seem to have such a trigger and that the evaluation report for the SEAM project identified Queensland's lack of consistent triggers for action as the reason for a very low rate of referrals for support.²⁸

While *'Every Day Counts'* is a valuable public message, a benchmark could be set 'behind the scenes' to be used as a trigger for investigation and if appropriate, intervention. The Committee discussed the current 'three consecutive days' trigger and had some concerns that this trigger could be more readily circumvented than a trigger based on an attendance rate within a given period of time – although the latter would need to be carefully defined to ensure early intervention for unexplained absences was facilitated. It is noted that the department is still considering its response to the Auditor-General's recommendation in this regard. The department is aiming to achieve the purpose of the Auditor-General's recommendation – that is, to create a clear trigger for action – which does not inadvertently send an unintended message to schools, students or parents that any unsatisfactory attendance by a student below that rate is acceptable.

²⁷ AG report, p33

²⁸ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, January 2012. *Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM), Evaluation Report for 2010*. 2% of Queensland students who exceeded the minimum standard set by the program of five unauthorised absences in a 10 week period, were referred for support. In contrast, 25% of those in the NT were referred.

2.7 Reporting

The lack of a clear definition of unsatisfactory attendance is, the Auditor-General found, a factor contributing to the lack of identification or monitoring of the extent of chronic absenteeism, truancy and school refusal. Half of the schools audited had not identified all students with chronic absenteeism. For example, one student had missed 45% of the year, but this had not been identified by the school and therefore was not being managed.²⁹

This suggests that poor attendance by individual students may not be identified or responded to where the overall attendance rate of the school is relatively high. Those students who are not identified, and whose poor attendance therefore goes unaddressed with potentially serious life consequences for that student, are of concern to the Committee. It is pleasing to note the department's advice that it has significantly reformed the reporting functionality available to schools, and increased the reporting requirements for schools, in an attempt to address this.³⁰

The Auditor-General concluded that reporting on Indigenous attendance rates occurs at a level that does not allow regional staff to monitor individual school performance or identification of where intervention might be required.³¹ The Committee will be interested to see whether the action plan addresses this issue. The question was not specifically canvassed with the department during its briefing of the Committee.

Another finding in respect of reporting is that schools are inconsistent in their management of attendance. Management includes following up unexplained absences, recording communication with parents, producing and using attendance reports and analysing, monitoring and tracking absences.

The Committee recognises that consistency is not an essential element of a good response to unsatisfactory attendance. In fact, individualised responses that reflect particular circumstances seem much more likely to have a positive impact. However, a consistent approach to reporting and analysis in respect of unsatisfactory attendance is highly desirable. It allows comparisons to be made and learnings to be shared beyond an individual school level, and would enhance government accountability to the people, offering assurance that it is working to meet its responsibilities to children and young people.

2.8 Penalising parents

The Auditor-General recommended that the department assess how effective the process to enforce the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* is, in increasing attendance.

Enforcement options provided under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* focus on changing parental behaviour and include a process that begins with contacting parents, progresses to writing letters and meeting with parents, referral to the police for prosecution. This can culminate in fines being imposed by a court.

The current penalty in Queensland for parents convicted of failing to ensure their children attend schools is a fine of 6 penalty units (currently \$660), and 12 penalty points (\$1320) for a second offence.³² Research has shown that a risk of penalising parents financially is that it may worsen the underlying causes of poor attendance – for example, where poverty or ill health is the cause.³³ Financial penalties also have different effects on families, depending on their financial position.

²⁹ AG Report, p27

³⁰ Hansard, DETE, p4

³¹ AG report, p35

³² *Education (General Provisions) Act 2002*, s 176

³³ QUT report, p10

The effectiveness of the current process (contact, letters, referral to police and court-imposed sanctions) cannot be assessed due to a lack of data. Significantly, less than a third of principals surveyed through the audit thought that the process was effective. In 2011 just three people were referred by DET to the Queensland Police Service for failing to ensure their child attended school, and of those, two were prosecuted. It is possible that the earlier stages of the process have the desired effect, and so prosecution is not considered appropriate in many cases. It is equally possible that school staff recognise that where the underlying cause of poor attendance is not parental apathy, aiming to change parental behaviour will have little impact on improving attendance.

The latter seems quite likely for Year 10 students, who are at an age where parental control over their behaviour would be gradually reducing as part of the growing up process. The Auditor-General identified that there is a significant decrease in attendance rates for Year 8 and 9 students, decreasing to a low of 87% by Year 10.³⁴ Approximately 47% of students in Year 10 missed the equivalent of one day or more of school per fortnight. In comparison, 31% of students in Years 1 to 10 missed the equivalent of one day or more of school per fortnight.

It may be that the key to improved school attendance by the Year 8 - 10 cohort lies in schools engaging young people, including providing a range of pathways to employment and further training. The Committee commends the work to this end that is occurring in Queensland.

Other responses that aim to change parental behaviour in respect of children's school attendance include government managed or sponsored programs such as the Commonwealth Government's School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) pilot program in 30 schools in six Queensland communities³⁵, and Queensland's Cape York Welfare Reform trial, jointly funded by the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments and operating in Aurukun, Hope Vale, Coen and Mossman Gorge. Both of these programs target parents dependent upon welfare payments, and can result in parents having part of their income 'managed' by Centrelink, or having payments suspended or cancelled. Lower levels of school attendance are associated with low socio-economic status, Indigenous status and remoteness, and increase the likelihood of continuing a cycle of welfare dependency, unemployment and sometimes, criminal behaviour.³⁶

SEAM and the Cape York Welfare Reform trial both target parent behaviour through what could be seen as a punitive approach. In the case of SEAM, this occurs as a penalty, with the process managed and decisions made by Centrelink officials on referral from a school principal. Centrelink officials may make referrals to social workers throughout the process. In the case of the Cape York Welfare Reform trial, decisions are made by community representatives, and income management may mean quarantining funding to ensure it is directed to supporting children, rather than suspending or cancelling it. This is not necessarily intended to be a punitive approach.

In Queensland, the Cape York Welfare Reform began in 2008 and applies to four communities in Cape York with the intention of 'restoring social norms'. Under the Cape York Welfare Reform a statutory body called the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) has been established with the power to make a range of orders in cases where a person on Centrelink payments is assessed as failing to meet their personal and social responsibilities. From August 2008 to the end of June 2009 a total of 616 referrals were made by the RFC to support services, including Wellbeing Centres which have been established in each of the four communities to provide generalist and alcohol and drug counselling. The FRC can also order that a

³⁴ Auditor-General of Queensland, May 2012. *Report 1: 2012. Improving student attendance.* Figures 2B and 2C, p17

³⁵ Logan Central, Kingston, Woodridge, Eagleby, Doomadgee, and Mornington Island

³⁶ SEAM evaluation report, January 2012, pp1-2

*person's welfare payment be subject to 'conditional income management' to ensure that the priority needs of that person, their partner and their children are met.*³⁷

The 'personal and social responsibilities' include ensuring that children attend school. It is interesting to note that the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial does not look at income management in isolation from other approaches to increasing individual and community responsibility and to improving student attendance rates, including 'radical' approaches to teaching, breakfast clubs, and community conferencing.³⁸ An evaluation of the trial will be completed later in 2012³⁹ and the Committee looks forward to reading the evaluation report.

The SEAM pilot project commenced in Queensland in October 2009. An evaluation report covering the first year (2010) was published in January 2012. Some Committee members wish to express their support for the pilots, advising that constituents report the program had a positive effect on school attendance rates. In Queensland from October 2009 to December 2010, 101 attendance notices were issued in the pilot sites. 55% of students whose parents had been issued an attendance notice subsequently improved their attendance. A total of 76% of parents were considered to have 'reasonable excuses' (which would include some of the 55% who nevertheless improved their attendance rates). Some families moved out of scope or had no determination made, and income support suspensions were applied to nine percent of notified children (four parents involving eight children in total).⁴⁰

The high proportion of 'reasonable excuses' supports the view that school attendance is affected by many factors, and therefore that targeting parental behaviour through punitive measures will not always be appropriate or effective. Parents in the SEAM schools have reported an increased awareness about the importance of their children attending school, which lends some support to the department's moves to raise awareness (eg through the *Every Day Counts* initiative). Perhaps increased awareness about the existence of punitive measures to enforce compliance, as occurs under SEAM, strengthens the receipt of the message.

The SEAM evaluation report found there was a decrease in unauthorised absences in Queensland for SEAM students, with those students having a greater increase in attendance rates than students generally. The gap narrowed considerably, with SEAM students' attendance rates increasing by 4% to 88.7%, compared to the non-SEAM student attendance rate which increased by 1% to 90.4%. It should be noted that much of the change is due to a reduction in unauthorised absences, with authorised absences remaining stable. It should also be noted that there was not necessarily a sustained improvement in attendance rates by individual students. Further, as only four families actually had payments suspended, it cannot be said with any certainty that the sanction has led to any improvement. The improvement could result from more and better referrals to support services, increased awareness that sanctions exist and will be used, or other changes in the school or family environments. The report notes that further evaluation work is required to demonstrate definite evidence that SEAM has had an impact on these rates.

Consistent with the Committee's previous comments about the effectiveness of targeting parents to change behaviour by the Year 8 - 10 cohort, there was a larger gap between attendance rates for

³⁷ <http://reconciliation.org.au/home/resources/factsheets/q-a-factsheets/welfare-reform-and-income-management>

³⁸ Courier Mail, 28 May 2010 – *Radical learning program changing kids lives.* http://www.news.com.au/radical-learning-program-changing-aboriginal-kids-lives/story-e6freoof-1225872255997?from=public_rss

³⁹ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/noel-pearson-stands-strong-on-cape-york-welfare-reform-trial/story-e6frgczx-1226429330505>

⁴⁰ SEAM evaluation report, p19

SEAM students and non-SEAM students in secondary schools than for primary schools. The report noted that *"SEAM student attendance in the secondary school years may represent a significant policy challenge"*.⁴¹

There are differing views about the effectiveness of approaches to improving school attendance that penalise parents. One prominent Indigenous educator⁴² is cited as seeing the benefit of prosecution as a last resort, as is the Queensland Association of State School Principals⁴³ – a view not necessarily reflected in the findings of the Auditor-General's report that *"45% of principals surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed that the process to enforce parental obligations... was effective in increasing attendance"*.⁴⁴ The department advised that only 27% of principals agreed that enforcing parental obligations was effective in increasing attendance.⁴⁵

The Committee sees the benefit of the prescribed legal process where it is used to identify and respond to the underlying causes of poor attendance. For example, using the parental contact and issuing notices stages of the process can assist schools to make referrals to services that can support parents, students and their families as required to address the problems leading to poor attendance. Where parental apathy or parental decisions are the cause of unsatisfactory attendance, continuing the process through to prosecution may well be an appropriate response.

The Committee notes that the Victorian Government is reportedly preparing to implement new legislation that will make it easier to penalise parents who repeatedly fail to send their children to school, giving power to fine parents to education officials rather than the courts. This would considerably simplify the final stages of the process. The Committee will be interested in the results of any change to the Victorian legislation on school attendance rates in that state.

The Committee concurs with the Auditor-General's recommendation that the effectiveness of the process be reviewed, and notes the department's advice that it will explore national and international research and consult with principals and regional staff on the effectiveness of enforcement provisions on lifting attendance.⁴⁶ It would be useful if this work examined the rationale behind the new approach planned for Victoria and if known, its effectiveness; and the broader range of legal options available in NSW (which were outlined in the Auditor-General's report). In the absence of evidence that supports the effectiveness of penalising parents, the risk is that there could be unintended consequences for already disadvantaged families in extending the use of the option to prosecute.

Conclusion

The Committee considered the report of, and received briefings on, the Auditor-General's performance audit on improving student attendance with great interest. This is a topic that affects the whole community, and all Committee members have some experience with it, bringing varying perspectives to the Committee's considerations.

The task of the Auditor-General was to consider whether the department's strategies and initiatives were effective in helping it achieve its targets in respect of student attendance rates, and his recommendations reflect the scope of that task. The Committee's task was to consider the Auditor-General's report, and in doing so, it touches on some policy issues. While it does not go so

⁴¹ Ibid, pp34, 36

⁴² Chris Sarra, cited in QUT report, p9

⁴³ Cited in QUT report, p9

⁴⁴ AG report, p29

⁴⁵ Hansard, DETE, p4

⁴⁶ Hansard, DETE, p4

far as to make recommendations about policy, it has made some recommendations and makes some comments that could inform further policy or strategy development to improve student attendance rates. We also aim to fulfil our function of promoting accountability by asking the Minister to advise the House how the Government proposes to respond to the Auditor-General's recommendations; and by reviewing state school attendance rates again in the first half of 2014.