Parliamentary Committees

Review of state school attendance rates

Report No. 42
Education and Innovation Committee
November 2014

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Abbreviations and definitions

Absence	Authorised - for example, illness, undertaking a medical procedure or attending a funeral Unauthorised - for example, shopping, visiting friends and relatives, fishing or camping Unexplained - when no information has been provided by parents/carers or students and the absence is pending the school's own investigations.[1]
Auditor-General	Auditor-General of Queensland
Average daily attendance	The percentage of a school's student body that attends on a typical day
CIM	Conditional Income Management
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CYWR	Cape York Welfare Reform
DETE	Department of Education, Training and Employment
FRA	Family Responsibilities Agreement
FRC	Family Responsibilities Commission
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NIRA	National Indigenous Reform Agreement
SEAM	Student Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure
Truancy	A measure of how many students miss school without an excuse, or as a certain number or certain frequency of unexcused absences
Unexplained or unsatisfactory absences or patterns of absences	• When a student is absent for three or more consecutive school days • Where there is a persistent pattern of unexplained absences or absences without reasonable excuses • Where a student's attendance is reasonably considered unsatisfactory by the principal.

[1] DETE, 2012, Performance Insights: Student Attendance.

Chair's foreword

On behalf of the Education and Innovation Committee of the 54th Parliament of Queensland (the committee) I am pleased to present the committee's report number 42 – *Review of state school attendance rates*.

The committee previously considered attendance rates in 2012, when we reviewed a report by the Auditor-General of Queensland in respect of how well the Department of Education, Training and Employment was performing in achieving stated targets to improve attendance. We published our report no. 7, *Review of Auditor-General's report no. 1 : 2012 – Improving student attendance*, in August 2012.

This review delivers on the intent stated in that report, to review attendance rates again in 2014.

Overall, members are pleased to see that the department has made significant improvements to systems that support schools to monitor and manage student attendance; and, perhaps as a result of that continued focus on attendance, the state-wide attendance rates have improved. Importantly, they have not only improved overall, but they have improved to an even greater degree for Indigenous students.

Given the significant gap in attendance rates between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students which still remains, this is good news indeed.

It seems to the committee that there is a need for a stronger program of evaluation so that schools, students, parents and the community can better understand what it is that makes a difference to attendance rates; and know what programs work and under what circumstances so that the success stories can be applied elsewhere.

I wish to thank the members of the committee for their detailed consideration of the issues covered by the inquiry. I also thank staff of the committee's secretariat and the Queensland parliamentary library for their support and assistance throughout the inquiry process.

Importantly, we want to thank the people who so generously shared with us their experiences and their expertise with improving school attendance. These include staff from Beenleigh State School, Woodridge State High School, Bundaberg State High School, Bargara State School, Bwgcolman Community School, St Michael's primary school; Burnett Heads State School; Goodwood State School; Walkervale State School; East Bundaberg State School; Bundaberg North State School; Mr David Glasgow, Family Responsibilities Commissioner; Dr Chris Sarra, Chairman, Stronger Smarter Institute; Ms Cathy O'Toole, CEO, SOLAS Inc; the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council and its staff; the PETRA project; the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities; and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood.

This review was greatly enhanced by the extensive data analysis support provided by the Queensland Audit Office, and we thank the Auditor-General, Mr Andrew Greaves, for making his staff available to work with us.

I commend the report to the House.

Rosemary Menkens MP
Chair

November 2014

Executive summary

This report is a result of the review undertaken by the Education and Innovation Committee (the committee) on student attendance in Queensland, and follows the committee's initial report in 2012 which considered the Auditor-General's performance audit examining the achievement of targets to improve student attendance in state schools in Queensland.

The report presents the following:

- research evidence as to school attendance, including:
  - its importance, including for particular populations, especially those facing educational disadvantage already
  - factors influencing attendance, including individual, school, family, community, socio-economic and cultural factors (for example, low academic self-concept, quality of teaching, family beliefs about the value of education, socio-economic status, health issues and culturally based attitudes towards education)
  - strategies for improving attendance) which are in the main developed at the school community level).
- attendance improvement strategies implemented by Australian state and commonwealth governments, such as the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial and the Remote School Attendance Strategy
- current attendance rates in Queensland state schools
- the government's responses to the 2012 Auditor-General and committee reports on improving student attendance.

The committee then presents its findings on consideration of all of the data. The findings are informed by conversations held with stakeholders as part of this review, and by members' understandings of issues within their own electorates.

The research evidence shows that attendance is linked to academic achievement and outcomes for all students, but even more so for some students, such as those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Therefore it is imperative that students attend school every day they can. There are a range of factors that influence attendance, and the research suggests that strategies should take a multimodal approach to successfully address those factors.

Although ultimately the responsibility of parents, the committee recognises schools play a valuable role in encouraging attendance. The research literature suggests that schools are more likely to experience success if they engage families and the community to improve attendance. However, the research also shows that it is not enough to simply focus on attendance; the school must also look at its pedagogy, curriculum, scheduling and the school environment making school a place students want to be.

It is pleasing to note that many of the strategies put in place by the department and the schools visited by the committee are consistent with the research.

The data examined by the committee shows that essentially, the news is good: statewide attendance rates are improved in semester one, 2014, on rates in 2013. They are probably improved on 2012 as well, but a change to the measurement of attendance from 2013 makes this uncertain. However, the statewide attendance rate masks uneven results around the state, and for different groups.

The most notable disparity is between attendance rates for Indigenous students state-wide and non-Indigenous students state-wide. While the statewide attendance rate for Indigenous students improved to a greater degree than did that for non-Indigenous students, the gap between those two populations remains wide at 7.4 per cent.

There are other disparities identified in the report, such as those between regions, school size and between grades, particularly in high school. For example, the Brisbane Metropolitan region has the highest number of students attending school 85 per cent of the time or more, while the Far North Queensland region has the lowest number of students attending in that category. The data also shows that smaller schools generally tend to have a higher number of students attending 85 per cent of the time or more compared to larger schools, and that the number of students attending 85 per cent of the time or more drops in years 9 and 10, but then increases again for years 11 and 12.

The report discusses DETE's response to the recommendations made in the 2012 Auditor-General's performance audit and the committee's 2012 report, and finds that the most significant action taken was the modifications to the OneSchool system to support better data collection.

Enhancements to the OneSchool system and roll marking procedure, which are supported by associated guidelines and procedures for monitoring and tracking attendance, have improved the quality of data available. Further, the schools visited were positive about the information the OneSchool system provides and the ways in which they can use the data to monitor attendance and develop appropriate strategies.

The committee also identifies a concern about the apparent lack of a concerted focus on addressing attendance below 85 per cent, disparities regarding how schools identify problem absenteeism and the lack of a consistent, specific trigger for action on low attendance by a student.

With regards to strategies used to improve attendance, the committee notes the improvements made to DETE's *Every Day Counts* campaign, but expresses concern at the lack of evidence-based resources available to schools. The committee also notes the importance of early intervention and tailoring strategies to particular groups, such as those likely to experience educational disadvantage (for example, low socio-economic status families, students in rural and remote locations, and students who are highly mobile), as well as the need to address barriers to a multimodal response that can provide support to families to assist with attendance.

Building on a recommendation regarding evaluation made in the committee's 2012 report, the committee recommends that an academically rigorous evaluation be undertaken on the existing strategies being implemented in schools to identify common features that lead to success in improving school attendance rates, especially those that may work in particular environments or with particular groups. The committee also requests further details on the evaluation and reporting processes for the Queensland Government's *Solid Partners Solid Futures* Indigenous education and employment strategy, and recommends that schools be encouraged to include and action monitoring and evaluation plans as they implement new programs or strategies. A lack of evaluation on the process for enforcing attendance sees the committee recommend that data be collected consistently for all steps of the process, so that evaluation can occur.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 **46**

That attendance rate targets be established and reported at a school and regional level, and reflect the social, economic and geographic context of that school and region.

Recommendation 2 **49**

That advice about recording data in OneSchool, including the definitions of absence types, is promoted on an ongoing basis through the weekly schools update newsletter and the *Every Day Counts* website.

Recommendation 3 **51**

That the Department of Education, Training and Employment report each year in its annual report the proportion of students in each attendance rate category including the less than 85 per cent attendance category.

Recommendation 4 **53**

That the government refine the *Every Day Counts* campaign to tailor it to specific groups (based on age, location or indigenous status) with low attendance rates.

Recommendation 5 **53**

That the government support the development of a suite of strategies focused on primary school children and children in the first year of secondary school and their families, to address attendance rates at the point when attendance habits are being formed.

Recommendation 6 **53**

That the government investigate ways that early childhood programs can promote attendance by increasing parent awareness of the importance of attendance, helping families overcome barriers to attendance and develop the routines for regular on-time attendance.

Recommendation 7 **53**

That the department and individual schools implement formal arrangements for support provision with service providers such as social workers and health care providers, to enable a more targeted and holistic response to the issues of students with chronic absenteeism.

Recommendation 8 **55**

That the Minister advise the committee about the evaluation and reporting processes attached to the *Solid Partners Solid Futures* strategy, and particularly Phase 1 and Phase 2 initiatives.

Recommendation 9 **56**

That the government explore options for an academically rigorous and independent evaluation of the existing strategies being implemented in Queensland (and perhaps in Australia) to identify common features that lead to success in improving school attendance rates; and identify features or strategies that may work in particular environments or with particular groups (for example, strategies for chronic absentees, for younger children, for students from low-socio-economic backgrounds, for Indigenous students).

Recommendation 10 **56**

That all schools enforcing parental obligations under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*:

- create the initial and warning notices in OneSchool
- record the outcome and effect on attendance in OneSchool.

Recommendation 11 **56**

That schools be encouraged to include and action monitoring and evaluation plans as new programs or strategies are implemented; and that the evaluations are published to help develop the evidence base to support strategies to improve school attendance rates.

Point for clarification

Point for clarification 1 **49**

The committee requests that the Minister include in the government response to this report, advice as to the data validation queries raised above.

1 Introduction

1.1 Role of the committee

The Education and Innovation Committee (the committee) was established by resolution of the Legislative Assembly on 18 May 2012, and consists of government and non-government members. One of the functions of a Parliamentary portfolio committee is to consider any matter referred to it by the Parliament.[2] Background

In 2012 a performance audit was undertaken by the Queensland Auditor-General, examining whether the strategies and initiatives put in place by the former Department of Education and Training (now the Department of Education, Training and Employment) were achieving the department's objective of improving student performance by one per cent statewide and to closing the gap in attendance rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2013.

The audit found that the statewide attendance rate target was not achieved, dropping from 91.1 per cent in 2008 to 90.0 per cent in 2011; and there was no change in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates and no indication that the gap would close by 2013.

However, it was clear that there had been some potentially effective strategies and initiatives implemented at the school and regional levels. Attendance rates had improved in some schools and in some areas. They had declined in others.

The key finding of the Auditor-General's report was 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 could not demonstrate how it would meet its targets. The Queensland Auditor-General made recommendations to address these issues.

The Auditor-General made six recommendations to improve the department's performance in achieving its targets.

The department accepted some of the Auditor-General's recommendations and proposed to undertake a range of actions which would implement some recommendations, and explore further aspects of others with a view to determining how best to address the issues raised.

In 2012 the Parliament referred to the committee *Report 1 : 2012 – Improving student attendance*, by the Auditor-General of Queensland. The Education and Innovation Committee considered the Auditor-General's report and tabled its own report of that consideration.[3] In it, the committee observed that while school attendance is the responsibility of parents and caregivers, schools play a key role in monitoring and facilitating attendance and it is government performance that was of interest to the Auditor-General.

The committee made four recommendations, including that the government advise the Parliament as to its implementation of the six Auditor-General recommendations.

The Parliament noted the committee's intent to review state school attendance rates in 2014 to ascertain whether there have been any significant changes resulting from implementation of the

[2] *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001*, s 92.

[3] Parliament of Queensland, Education and Innovation Committee, *Report No. 7: Review of Auditor-General's report 1 : 2012 – Improving student attendance*.

Auditor-General's 2012 recommendations, or from other strategies that might be implemented by the department or individual schools. This report details the findings of the committee's review.

1.2 Objective of the 2014 review

The intent of the committee's review of state school attendance rates as stated in its 2012 report was to ensure the issue of school attendance remains a priority by drawing attention to it again; and to inform the public whether there have been any significant changes that might have resulted from implementation of the Auditor-General's recommendations, or from other strategies.

As part of this review, the committee has further explored research evidence in respect of school attendance. This is provided as contextual information, and could be drawn upon by those developing strategies – and we hope be built upon, as evaluation of those strategies informs the evidence. The committee has also used the available research, which is summarised in section 2 of this report, to inform its assessment of progress towards improving attendance rates in Queensland.

1.3 Review process

The committee has obtained and considered the most recently available data from the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) in respect of attendance rates. It has also considered whether and how the department has implemented the 2012 recommendations of the Auditor-General and the committee. The committee has reviewed available research evidence in respect of school attendance rates and strategies to improve them, visited schools and communities, and sought advice from other Australian jurisdictions as to how they manage school attendance rates.

Articles, guidelines, vignettes and commentary on the department's *Every Day Counts* Website were also considered.

Raw data, which has enabled the committee to compare attendance rates in 2014 with the previous year, was provided by the department and analysed with the support of the Queensland Audit Office.

The committee had informal conversations with a relatively small number of principals, along with teachers and other attendance improvement staff from several schools in urban, regional and remote locations including an Indigenous community, to provide some perspective to the data and to the research evidence. The committee also had informal conversations with Indigenous community leaders, Indigenous student attendance officers employed under the Commonwealth Government's Remote School Attendance Program. As informal conversations, these were not intended to ascertain any representative viewpoints.

The committee was formally briefed by officials from DETE, the Family Responsibilities Commissioner, the chairman of the Stronger Smarter Institute, and a mental health support service provider; again to provide perspective.

Advice was sought from the government departments responsible for state schooling in both New South Wales and Victoria as to approaches to improving attendance used in those jurisdictions. Research into three overseas jurisdictions (New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom) was also conducted.

2 The research about student attendance

2.1 Importance of attendance at school

Research shows that there is a strong correlation between attendance and academic achievement.[4] Regular school attendance is seen as important to achieve core skills, such as numeracy and literacy, as well as social skills.[5] If a child's attendance rate is at less than 90 per cent, then their education is considered to be at risk. In a large study undertaken in Western Australia, average academic achievement on NAPLAN tests declined with any absence from school and continued to decline as absence rates increased. This occurred across all sub-groups.[6] These results support research in the USA which found that students who miss more school than their peers score lower on the NAPLAN tests regardless of age, racial and ethnic group or location.[7]

The Western Australian study also found that the effects of absence accumulate over time. Absence from school was related to academic achievement in numeracy, reading and writing not only in the current year, but in future years as well, meaning that if a child misses school it can have an ongoing impact on their learning. The authors concluded that, because of the nature of the relationship between absence from school and achievement, every day of attendance in school contributes towards a child's learning, and that academic outcomes are enhanced by maximising attendance in school. They also concluded that there is no "safe" threshold at which absence is not a problem.[8]

The harm to students from low attendance is not restricted to poor test results or academic performance. Poor attendance can have negative social effects because students with high levels of absenteeism tend to become social outsiders who don't feel that they belong at school.[9] If children do not attain the necessary academic and social skills from regular attendance, they are at higher risk of school expulsion and drop out, engaging in criminal activities, and use of tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs.[10] Early departure from the school system, either through expulsion or dropping out, also limits students' future employment opportunities and earning potential and puts them at risk of welfare dependency and involvement in the justice system.[11] There is also a lower probability that these students will undertake alternative education and training.[12]

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4 Sheldon, Steven B. 2007. 'Improving student attendance with school, family, community and partnerships.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 100(51): 267-275; Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

5 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

6 Hancock, Kirsten, Carrington Shepherd, David Lawrence, and Stephen Zubrick. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.

7 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

8 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.

9 Lamb, Stephen, Anne Walstab, Richard Teese, Margaret Vickers and Russ Rumberger. 2004. *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*. Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne.

10 McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256; Sheldon, Steven B. 2007. 'Improving student attendance with school, family, community and partnerships.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 100(51): 267-275.

11 Daraganova, Galina. 2012. Is it okay to be away? *School attendance in the primary school years*. Australian Institute of Family Studies; Maynard, Brandy, McCrea, Katherine Tyson, Pigott, Terri and Kelly, Michael S. 2013. 'Indicated truancy interventions for chronic truant students: A Campbell Systematic Review.' *Research on Social Work Practice* 23(1): 5-21; McConnell,

Not only does absenteeism have an impact on the student themselves, but the disruption to the learning environment also impacts on peers who regularly attend school, and teachers when the stage of learning of different students and classroom dynamics are altered by the disappearance and reappearance of such students.[13]

In general, students usually have a consistently high rate of school attendance during primary school, but once they reach high school there is a marked decrease in the rate of attendance.[14] The transition to high school can be difficult, and can be a point of disengagement, especially for those students who have already had higher levels of absenteeism in primary school.[15] This is indicative of the belief that chronic absenteeism interacts with the rhythms of schooling, with student absenteeism appearing or increasing at key transitions − the start of formal education, in kindergarten and first grade, the moves into middle and high schools, and senior year.[16] It is also worth noting that poor attendance in the first month of school can predict chronic absence for the entire year.[17]

Research about students who exit from school early, has shown that patterns of attendance for most students are established as early as the first grade, with chronic non-attendance or absenteeism the beginning of a slow process which eventually leads to a student dropping out of school.[18] In one study using absenteeism data, the authors were able to distinguish dropouts from graduates by the third grade with 66 per cent accuracy.[19]

Early childhood education has been found to have a positive impact on students' acquisition of the social and cognitive skills that make school a more positive experience and lead to later academic achievement. If students have a high rate of absenteeism in kindergarten, which continues through schooling, they experience lower academic outcomes compared to their peers.[20] Unfortunately, it may not be widely known that attendance at early childhood programmes, such as kindergarten, matters. These programmes have traditionally been viewed as a transition into formal education rather than the beginning of formal education.[21] Hence early interventions, which include education

Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256.

12 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

13 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

14 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.

15 Walls, Charles. 2003. *New approaches to truancy prevention in urban schools*. ERIC Digest. http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-2/truancy.html; Lamb et al. 2004. 'Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia.' Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne.

16 Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. 2012. *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

17 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

18 McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256.

19 Lamb et al. 2004. 'Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia.' Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne.

20 Connolly, Faith and Linda Olson. 2012. Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. Baltimore Education Research Consortium; Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Center for Children in Poverty.

21 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Center for Children in Poverty.

about the importance of attendance in the early years, may be important to ensure success later in life and to stop the progression from absenteeism to early exit which can lead to more serious behaviours and outcomes.[22]

The imperative to establish good attendance routines in primary school is also important for the move into high school, as some research has shown that there is a stronger correlation between attendance and achievement for early secondary students than there is for primary school students.[23] The irony is that at the point when this stronger correlation occurs, attendance rates decline.[24]

The good news is that research has shown that improving student attendance can improve learning and academic performance.[25] One study found that "*improvements in absence rates over time, particularly for unauthorised absences, protected students from falling further behind and in some cases were related to improvements in NAPLAN scores*".[26] Hence, it appears that if attendance patterns improve, the impact of absenteeism can be reduced.[27]

However, it should be noted that while attendance is clearly an important factor in academic achievement, it is not enough by itself to lead to academic improvement.[28] Studies on attendance and academic achievement have found cases where comparatively poor attenders achieve well academically, while some very consistent attenders do not perform well.[29] It is argued that substantial improvements in educational achievement cannot be gained just by increasing attendance[30], and that students need to be engaged, to participate and to feel they belong.[31] This is affected by what schools have to offer, degree of engagement with school learning, curriculum fidelity and content, availability of enrichment resources within the school environment, extra-curricular learning opportunities, and the quality of teaching and educational leadership.[32] In one Australian study on schools participating in the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities program, it was found that schools that had achieved improved educational outcomes did so through a combination of community-based attendance policies and professional skilling that focused on

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22 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works; Department of Education, Science and Training. 2003. *National report to Parliament on Indigenous education and training*, 2002. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.; Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. *Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

23 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

24 Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

25 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

26 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia, p vii.

27 Connolly, Faith and Linda Olson. 2012. Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

28 Ladwig, James and Allan Luke. 2014. 'Does improving school level attendance lead to improved school level achievement? An empirical study of indigenous educational policy in Australia.' *Australian Educational Researcher* 41(2):171-194.

29 Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

30 Ladwig, James and Allan Luke. 2014. 'Does improving school level attendance lead to improved school level achievement? An empirical study of indigenous educational policy in Australia.' *Australian Educational Researcher* 41(2):171-194.

31 Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

32 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.

improving the quality and focus of curriculum and pedagogy, leading the authors to suggest that systematic school-level reform of curriculum and pedagogy is also required in addition to increasing attendance levels.[33]

2.2 Indigenous student attendance

Education has been identified as a key contributor to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and closing the gap, with attendance believed to be an integral factor accounting for the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes.[34] Hence, encouraging and facilitating attendance at school is particularly important for Indigenous Australians who, as a population, have lower levels of educational attainment than non-Indigenous Australians.[35] The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey suggested that as much as one-third of the gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children could be attributed to poorer rates of school attendance for Aboriginal children.[36]

The gap in attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is likely to exist from the beginning of primary school and then widen over time, particularly in the early years of secondary school.[37] In one study it was found that Indigenous students are more likely to have missed two months or more of school than non-Indigenous students, with the difference greater in secondary school. The gaps in attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia are, on average, the largest in Year 10.[38] Interestingly, attendance levels improve for Indigenous students who remain in the senior years.[39]

2.3 Reasons for non-attendance

There is some debate in the literature about the causes of non-attendance. However there are a number of factors that are consistently identified by the research, and these include individual, family, school, community, socio-economic and cultural factors.[40] Moreover, it is believed that these

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33 Ladwig, James G and Luke, Allan. 2014). 'Does improving school level attendance lead to improved school level achievement? An empirical study of indigenous educational policy in Australia.' Australian Educational Researcher 41 (2):171-194, p192.

34 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p 1; Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research; Department of Education, Science and Training. 2003. 'National report to Parliament on Indigenous education and training, 2002. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

35 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p 1; Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

36 Zubrick Stephen, Sven Silburn, John De Maio, Carrington Shepherd, Judith Griffin, Robin Dalby, Francis Mitrou, David Lawrence, Colleen Hayward, Glenn Pearson, Helen Milroy, Jill Milroy and Adele Cox. 2006. *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People.* Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

37 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University; Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

38 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

39 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

40 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p 1; Maynard et al. 2013. 'Indicated truancy interventions for chronic truant students: A Campbell Systematic Review.' *Research on Social Work Practice* 23(1): 5-21; Baker, M.L. J.N. Sigman and M.E. Nugent. 2001. *Truancy*

factors can work in concert with each other, making the issue of non-attendance multi-dimensional, and difficult to address. Chang and Romero argue that:[41]

> *…children's development and educational outcomes take place in the context of multiple, ongoing influences among children themselves, their immediate environments (family, school, peer group), and the larger environments (neighbourhood, community, culture, society at large). Whether children attend school regularly reflects whether children's environments - including family, schools, community, culture and society – adequately address their needs.*

Perhaps not surprisingly, research undertaken with parents and students finds that these groups tend to stress school-related factors as the main cause for non-attendance, while teachers and those in the area of education tend to assign influence to parental attitudes and the home environment.[42]

Furthermore, the reasons for non-attendance may differ between primary and high school. Primary school children are more likely to be dependent on parents to get them to school, mostly remain in the same classroom and there are usually strict guidelines about entering and leaving the school. Hence, primary school students are less likely to skip school or stay home without parental consent.[43] Therefore it may be the parent or carer who determines school attendance in the primary school years.[44] In the secondary years, it is more likely that it becomes the student's decision to absent themselves from school, which may be for a range of reasons.[45]

Individual factors

Individual or personal factors can impact on attendance include students' social competence in relations with peers, students' perceived self-esteem, low academic self-concept or achievement, lack of school-engaged friends, drug and alcohol abuse, and involvement in anti-social behaviour in class.[46] Students with disabilities, learning difficulties or other special needs and those with health-related issues, both physical and mental, are also more likely to have lower rates of attendance.[47]

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reduction: Keeping students in school. Washington DC:UU Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

41 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty, p 11.

42 Gray, Jan and Gary Partington. 2003. 'School attendance and non-attendance.' In Beresford, Q and Partington, G (eds) *Resistance and reform: Aboriginal youth and education*. Perth: UWA Press; Malcom, H, Wilson, Y, Davidson, J and Kirk, S. 2003. Absence from school: A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs. Research Report 424. Nottingham: DfES Publications.

43 Daraganova, Galina. 2012. *Is it okay to be away? School attendance in the primary school years*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, p 60.

44 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

45 Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. 2012. *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

46 Corville-Smith, Jane, Ryan, Bruce, Adams, Gerald, and Dalicandro, Tom. 'Distinguishing absentee students from regular attenders: the combined influence of personal, family, and school factors.' Journal of Youth and Adolescence 27(5); Walls, Charles. 2003. *New approaches to truancy prevention in urban schools*. ERIC Digest. http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-2/truancy.html

47 Productivity Commission. 2012. Schools' Workforce – Research Report; Ready, Douglas. (2010). 'Socioeconomic disadvantage, school attendance, and early cognitive development: The differential effects of school exposure'. Sociology of Education 83(4): 271-286; Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

School factors

School factors that have been identified as having an impact on absenteeism include school climate and teaching issues, such as school size (with attendance being higher in smaller schools), quality of teaching, high rates of staff turnover or teacher absenteeism, chaos in the classroom and the school environment, including the ability to engage the cultural and learning styles of a diverse student population.

Other factors relate to the student, including student perception of the quality of their school life, poor relationship between students and teachers, and their experience of bullying. Schools may also have inconsistent attendance policies and a lack of meaningful consequences, which leads to students lacking an understanding of the consequences, both academic and legal, of poor attendance.[48] Attendance is believed to be higher when schools are able to engage students in the learning experience, the teaching staff are experienced, and parents are engaged in their children's education.[49]

Family factors

Family related factors, such as family involvement, are believed to be a predictor of student attendance.[50] Factors that influence the extent to which families become involved include the parents' beliefs about the value of education, family socio-economic status and parent's own childhood experiences.[51] Some parents may not understand how to, or why, they should support their children's education, especially if their own experience of school was negative.[52]

Family residential mobility, family obligations such as providing emergency day care for younger siblings or taking on elder-care responsibilities can also impact on attendance.[53] Families where parents work night shifts or multiple jobs in order to earn an adequate income to support their family can also have difficulty getting their kids to school.[54] A lack of parental supervision or control, child abuse or neglect, mental illness, domestic violence, involvement in the criminal justice system and family instability caused by factors such as drug or alcohol abuse also have an impact on attendance.[55] Other risk factors for families that can impact on attendance have been found to

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48 Daraganova, Galina. 2012. Is it okay to be away? School attendance in the primary school years. Australian Institute of Family Studies, p 60; Sheldon 2007, Walls, Charles. 2003. *New approaches to truancy prevention in urban schools*. ERIC Digest. http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-2/truancy.html; Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.; Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. *Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

49 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

50 McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256.

51 Sheldon, Steven. 2007. 'Improving student attendance with school, family, community and partnerships.' The Journal of Educational Research 100(51): 267-275.

52 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

53 Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. 2012. *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

54 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

55 Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. *Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. *Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

include teenage motherhood, single motherhood, low maternal education, welfare, maternal unemployment, food insecurity, poor maternal health and multiple siblings (essentially, poverty). If families are confronted with multiple risks, the likelihood of absenteeism increases.[56]

Community

It has also been suggested that the community plays a role in attendance and absenteeism, as community factors can affect individual, family, school and socio-economic factors, such as the economic conditions of the community and the differing culturally based attitudes towards education.[57] Communities that have good support systems in place for families can help make up for disadvantages experienced at home. However, when whole communities are disadvantaged or distressed, the impact can make it difficult for families to ensure their children stay on track for school success. These neighbourhoods may also suffer from a lack of community institutions to support families and encourage attendance at school. On a more positive note, research has found that if children are exposed to a high quality educational program, they were less likely to be absent in primary school despite the disadvantages of community in which they live.[58]

Socio-economic factors

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students in rural and remote locations, Indigenous students, students who are highly mobile, students from minority backgrounds and students whose parents had lower levels of education and occupational status, are more likely to experience educational disadvantage, which has been identified as a predictor of absenteeism. Any one of these factors could impact on school attendance. Unfortunately, many students experiencing disadvantage, particularly Indigenous students, face multiple sources of disadvantage.[59]

The association between disadvantage and poorer attendance is evident from the beginning of formal schooling.[60] In a large study undertaken in Western Australia, it was found that attendance gaps were established early (by at least Year 1) by students experiencing disadvantage, that is, students in schools with a lower socio-economic index, Indigenous students, students who were highly mobile and those whose parents had lower levels of education and occupational status. The authors suggested that attendance was influenced by factors and events prior to school entry, such as caregiver attitude and expectations towards education, and that the gaps remain constant throughout primary school, and become wider when students enter high school.[61] The same study also found that amongst disadvantaged students, achievement declined rapidly with increasing levels

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56 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

57 Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. *Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

58 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

59 Productivity Commission 2012, *Schools Workforce*, Research Report, Canberra; Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research; McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256.

60 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.; Productivity Commission. 2012. *Schools' Workforce – Research Report.*

61 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.

of absence, whereas more advantaged children had relatively high achievement levels irrespective of their level of attendance at school. This pattern is particularly evident in the primary school years.[62]

Low-income families are more likely to have lower levels of attendance and therefore be chronically absent, and the impact of absence is greater, possibly because their families lack resources to make up for lost time. More advantaged children may have alternative resources that help them learn, both at school and in the home, during the early years of school.[63]

Research has shown that low-income students are academically behind their more advantaged classmates when they start kindergarten and that the difference increases as children move through school.[64] In addition to the belief that it may be because of resources available to students of more affluent families, it has also been suggested that academic performance at school requires conformity to behaviours that are culturally-specific and are consciously supported by families of high socio-economic status, such as an emphasis on early reading and language development, parent participation in the tasks children bring home from primary school, and the continuing involvement of parents and other family members in their children's homework through high school.[65] Therefore, absences from school have a stronger negative effect for socio-economically disadvantaged children.[66]

Families of low socio-economic status often face multiple life challenges, such as unemployment, home instability and high levels of mobility, food insecurity, poor health, and unreliable transportation, and any one of these can impact on a student's attendance.[67] Students from low socio-economic status families may be required to fill the role of parent if the family is affected by illness or mental health problems, or may have to undertake child care duties if the parent/s work and cannot afford child care or work multiple jobs as mentioned earlier. Older students may also have to work to support the family.[68] Children may also be reluctant to attend school if they lack the appropriate clothing or uniform due to their family's financial situation.[69] Broken or poor attendance due to these factors has been shown to lead to a decline in academic achievement, which can lead to low academic self-esteem and subsequent disengagement from school.[70] Unfortunately, as

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ready, Douglas. 2010. 'Socioeconomic disadvantage, school attendance, and early cognitive development: The differential effects of school exposure.' *Sociology of Education* 83(4): 271-286.

65 Lamb et al. 2004. *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*. Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne.

66 Ready, Douglas. 2010. 'Socioeconomic disadvantage, school attendance, and early cognitive development: The differential effects of school exposure.' *Sociology of Education* 83(4): 271-286.

67 Connolly, Faith and Linda Olson. 2012. *Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten.* Baltimore Education Research Consortium.; Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

68 Lamb et al. 2004. *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*. Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne; Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. *Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

69 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

70 Lamb et al. 2004. *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*. Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne; Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. *Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

mentioned earlier, school absences have stronger negative effects for socio-economically disadvantaged children than for their more advantaged peers.[71]

What this means is that formal schooling has a stronger influence on a disadvantaged student's academic development, that is, the effects of schooling on cognitive development are stronger for lower socio-economic status children. While formal schooling may not eradicate socio-economic status differences in academic performance among young children, it is likely that it reduces the rate at which inequalities grow. Therefore it is particularly important that the attendance of children from low socio-economic families be a focus of strategies to assist with closing the achievement gap.[72]

Indigenous students

As mentioned above, a range of individual, school, family, socio-economic and community characteristics impact on school attendance. For Indigenous students, there are some factors that may be unique to, or more salient for, the Indigenous population (or segments of the Indigenous population).[73] These characteristics are often experienced by Indigenous students in combination, exacerbating the disadvantage they experience.[74]

Remoteness has been shown to be associated with attendance rates, and proportionally more Indigenous Australians live in remote parts of the country than do other Australians.[75] While Indigenous student attendance is substantially below that of non-Indigenous students in all areas, attendance among Indigenous children is much lower in remote areas than in urban areas.[76] The performance of remote Indigenous students on NAPLAN testing shows that these students are most likely to perform poorly compared with their urban peers and non-Indigenous peers. The gap in performance on these tests increases the longer the students remain in schooling. Students sit these tests based on chronological age, but for many of these students their age does not reflect the amount of time spent in school.[77]

Some argue that attendance rates in remote areas are lower because it is more difficult and more costly to access education in remote areas.[78] While the presence of a primary school is not uncommon even in remote areas, relatively few Indigenous communities have a secondary school in or near the community. The distance to a secondary school has been found to have a strong effect on the attendance and completion of studies by individuals.[79] It has also been argued that

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71 Ready, Douglas. 2010. 'Socioeconomic disadvantage, school attendance, and early cognitive development: The differential effects of school exposure.' *Sociology of Education* 83(4): 271-286.

72 Ibid.

73 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p 3; Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better practice in school attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. DETYA.

74 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

75 Ibid.

76 Biddle, Nicholas, Boyd Hunter and Robert Schwab. 2004. *Mapping Indigenous education participation*. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.

77 Jorgensen, Robyn. 2012. 'Enhancing educational performance for remote Aboriginal Australians: What is the impact of attendance on performance?' *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 40(1): 19-34.

78 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Biddle.

79 Biddle, Nicholas, Boyd Hunter and Robert Schwab. 2004. *Mapping Indigenous education participation*. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.

attendance is lower because the educational institutions that are available are often lacking in basic services, adequately trained teachers and student amenities.[80]

The ongoing poor health profile of Indigenous children is part of the explanation for high rates of school non-attendance.[81] Of particular concern is the increased rate of ear infections which results in language and hearing problems early in life and then goes on to have an impact on education and learning. Indigenous children are also at greater risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties, potentially making it difficult for them to concentrate, regulate their behaviour or participate socially.[82] It has been suggested that for young Indigenous children at least, when it comes to strategies addressing attendance, an additional focus should be on children with poor health outcomes.[83]

The impact of the relationship between socio-economic status and attendance is particularly pertinent to Indigenous students. These students experience a greater risk of poverty, impoverished social environments, poor living conditions and racism and social exclusion. These factors, combined with other factors such as poor health, put them at risk of greater educational disadvantage. Hence it is argued that there is a greater need for appropriate resources, services and programmes to address the disadvantage they face, and support them in their attendance at school.[84]

Mobility, which is at least in part associated with socio-economic status, has been shown to impact on attendance, with one study showing that each additional move (excluding the transition from primary to secondary school) has an effect on overall attendance.[85] Mobility is reported to be a major cause of non-attendance in the Indigenous population and therefore has serious consequences in relation to educational outcomes. Indigenous students not only move from one school to another more frequently than non-Indigenous students but, in tradition-oriented remote communities, family mobility is associated with social and cultural obligations, which often entails lengthy student absences from school.[86]

Home factors such as parental engagement and support have also been shown to affect attendance of Indigenous students.[87] Parents who have not completed Year 12, and may have had poor educational experiences, may place less value on education and therefore may be less engaged in their children's learning. Family instability is also an important factor in unexplained absences.[88]

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80 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Biddle.

81 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

82 Zubrick et al. 2006. The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People. Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

83 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

84 Zubrick et al. 2006. The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People. Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

85 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

86 Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

87 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

88 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

It can also be a challenge when unemployment is high and job prospects are low, and therefore the benefits of an education are not immediately obvious.[89] In one study a survey found that while Indigenous students and parents recognised the link between education and future employment, good jobs were seen as unattainable and therefore schooling was devalued.[90]

In an attempt to understand why a large proportion of Indigenous students are not attending school, Biddle (2014) conceptualises school attendance as a student's decision to attend school being based on the costs and benefits of attendance, with non-attendance indicating that the costs are too high or the benefits are too low. He goes on to say that a student may not be conscious of the decisions being made, and that many of the costs and benefits, especially the economic ones, are likely to be mediated through their parents or carers. Other influences include social norms within the family and community in which the child lives. One of the difficulties with such an analysis by a student is that the benefits of education are likely to be received in the future, while the costs are more likely to be immediate. If a student has little interest in their future, then this will also have an impact on the cost-benefit analysis.[91]

School-related factors may also have an impact on attendance. While important for all students, recent research has identified that school-based factors, such as the teaching approach (pedagogy), the curriculum and the school environment, are of significant importance in relation to the non-attendance of Indigenous students due to unique cultural factors, and may play a more important role in improving attendance than family background.[92] A lack of Indigenous parental or community involvement in the schooling process can also lead to low attendance.[93] Other factors identified that have an impact on attendance have included students' previous negative experiences with school, poor teacher-student relationships, no sense of belonging, language barriers, racism, poor self-perception of academic ability, poor transitions from primary to secondary school, low expectations, an earlier lack of education success, and teacher attitudes, expectations and a tendency to rely on deficit explanations of low levels of academic achievement.[94] Also important is the experience of bullying or being treated unfairly. Those students who are bullied or treated unfairly at school (because of their Indigenous status) are more likely to miss school without permission than those who are not.[95]

However, schools can also help to balance the impact of other factors that impact on attendance. One study found a large variation in attendance between schools in similar geographic and

89 Jorgensen, Robyn. 2012. 'Enhancing educational performance for remote Aboriginal Australians: What is the impact of attendance on performance?' *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 40(1): 19-34.

90 Lamb et al. 2004. *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*. Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne.

91 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

92 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

93 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

94 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. Better practice in school attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students. DETYA.

95 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

socio-economic situations with similar level students, leading the authors to conclude that practices at the school level could significantly improve Indigenous school attendance rates.[96]

It has been suggested that for Indigenous students, education is complex and multi-layered. Indigenous children must gain the skills, values and knowledge that Indigenous people hold and is delivered by Indigenous people, and also gain the necessary skills and knowledge from the Australian education system which is largely delivered and determined by non-Indigenous people.[97]

One of the major criticisms of schools in relation to Aboriginal attendance is the curriculum that is offered, as it is seen to have little relevance to the home cultures of Aboriginal people. Furthermore, the home language may be different to the Standard Australian English used in schools. The learning styles used in Aboriginal communities have also been identified as quite different to those in schools. For example, in some Aboriginal cultures an approach akin to apprenticeship may be used where they observe until they feel comfortable undertaking the task, while schooling values public displays where students are required to demonstrate what they have learned.[98] Western education also focuses on moving the individual forward, whereas one of the core values of Indigenous society sees relationships as more important, and therefore they do not want to leave anyone behind, even in the classroom. As a result, it has been claimed that Indigenous children feel they are sacrificing or compromising their culture to be successful in western education.[99] To address this it has been suggested that Indigenous knowledge needs to be embedded into education, along with it being taught by Indigenous people, which will help to retain identity and culture.[100]

There are also concerns though, that too much adjustment to the curriculum to reflect Aboriginal culture may restrict students' quality of learning. Some Aboriginal leaders argue that maintaining this approach may be counter to the real goal of schooling, that is, literacy, numeracy and preparation for work. Hence the challenge is to offer a curriculum that will interest students but still ensure high educational outcomes.[101]

Cultural factors can play a role in absenteeism, particularly in remote areas, where cultural events can lead to students being away from school for lengthy periods of time. For example, students may be away for an extended period for sorry business or to attend ceremonies.[102] The impact of such extended absences on education was recognised in *The Forrest Review: Creating Parity*, which included steps in its recommendations to ensure that school attendance is not undermined by activities that give families an incentive to take students away from school for a lengthy period of time.[103]

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96 Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

97 Zubrick et al. 2006. The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People. Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

98 Jorgensen, Robyn. 2012. 'Enhancing educational performance for remote Aboriginal Australians: What is the impact of attendance on performance?' *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 40(1): 19-34.

99 Zubrick et al. 2006. The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People. Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

100 Ibid.

101 Jorgensen, Robyn. 2012. 'Enhancing educational performance for remote Aboriginal Australians: What is the impact of attendance on performance?' *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 40(1): 19-34.

102 Ibid.

103 Forrest, Andrew. 2014. The Forrest Review: Creating Parity. Licensed from the Commonwealth of Australia under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia Licence.

Furthermore, participation in men's business, which can happen at an age as young as 13, subsequently sees the student as a man who is capable of deciding whether or not he attends school. He cannot be compelled to go to school. Cultural activities may also involve the segregation of the genders, which can make it difficult and culturally inappropriate for young men to interact with a female teacher, or a young woman to interact with a male teacher.[104]

2.4 Strategies to improve attendance

Effective strategies

It has been noted in a number of reports and research papers that there is a dearth of high-quality evaluations of programs focused on increasing attendance or reducing absenteeism, making it difficult to identify effective strategies.[105] Criticisms of the research to date include the reviews being narrative in nature and not presenting their findings systematically; emphasis on particular studies considered "effective" rather than computing effect sizes of the studies; and failing to examine variability in effects by study, participant, or intervention characteristics.[106] There is also little comparability when looking at current attendance research according to some researchers.[107] Much of the research has focused on causes, correlates, and consequences rather than effects of intervention, making it difficult to use an evidence-based approach to strategy development and implementation.[108]

Purdie and Buckley (2010) state that "*the reasons for non-attendance and non-completion of school are complex and contextual; that there is no simple answer*".[109] There is not one single strategy or set of strategies that will work at all schools. It is suggested that:

> *While the research shows that absenteeism affects outcomes for students of all backgrounds, it is important to recognize that solutions must be grounded in an understanding of the particular barriers to attendance faced by students and families of different linguistic, cultural, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as the assets different types of families and communities bring to the table.*[110]

Approaches to improve attendance or reduce absenteeism could be conceived in terms of Biddle's cost-benefit approach. Strategies may place a cost on non-attendance as a way of limiting non-attendance, and may take the form of punitive strategies such as suspension, prosecution or income management. Alternatively, strategies may provide a benefit for attending as a way of

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104 Jorgensen, Robyn. 2012. 'Enhancing educational performance for remote Aboriginal Australians: What is the impact of attendance on performance?' *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 40(1): 19-34.

105 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p 18, Maynard et al. 2013. 'Indicated truancy interventions for chronic truant students: A Campbell Systematic Review.' *Research on Social Work Practice* 23(1): 5-21; McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256.

106 Maynard et al. 2013. 'Indicated truancy interventions for chronic truant students: A Campbell Systematic Review.' *Research on Social Work Practice* 23(1): 5-21.

107 McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256.

108 Maynard et al. 2013. 'Indicated truancy interventions for chronic truant students: A Campbell Systematic Review.' *Research on Social Work Practice* 23(1): 5-21.

109 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p 18.

110 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

promoting attendance, and may take the form of a rewards scheme or the offer of attractive extracurricular programs. It has been suggested that focusing on both rewarding as well as punitive strategies may be useful.[111] A third category relates to the development of relationships via communication and collaboration strategies.[112]

The approach supported by the research literature suggests that it is best to build on the strengths and resources available to the school and local community with strategies that provide both an incentive to attend school, and meaningful consequences for those with poor attendance. Some researchers believe that communication and collaboration strategies and those designed to recognise good attendance are more likely to lead to improved attendance than punitive approaches.[113] Hence it is suggested that programs should offer positive supports that promote school, rather than, or in advance of, punitive responses such as legal action.[114] Strategies also need to consider the underlying issues for there to be any long-term change and therefore, where possible, strategies should consider the different factors outlined that impact on attendance (depending on which are relevant to the situation).[115] There needs to be a sustained focus on attendance over time, and programs should include both strategies that increase attendance and strategies that manage absenteeism.[116]

In the evaluations that have been undertaken on attendance-related strategies, a key theme of successful programs was an approach that incorporated collaboration between a range of stakeholders, which may include the student, school, school districts, parents, public agencies, community organisations, and law enforcement agencies.[117] The reasons for low attendance are likely to be multi-faceted, and therefore it is believed that strategies require a multi-faceted approach.[118]

However, in a meta-analysis on interventions for chronic absenteeism and truancy, there was found to be a lack of available evidence to support the view that collaborative or multimodal interventions are more effective than simple, non-collaborative interventions. The study also found that while students benefited from interventions targeting attendance behaviours, there was no program that

111 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University; Gottfried, M.A. 2010. "*Evaluating the Relationship between Student Attendance and Achievement in Urban Elementary and Middle Schools: An Instrumental Variables Approach*" American Education Research Journal, 47:434-465.

112 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

113 Ibid.

114 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

115 Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. *Truancy reduction: keeping students in school*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

116 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

117 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Sheldon 2007; Walls, Charles. 2003. *New approaches to truancy prevention in urban schools*. ERIC Digest. http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-2/truancy.html; Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. *Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

118 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.

stood out as being more effective than the others, and the average rates of attendance were still below acceptable levels.[119]

Despite the results of the meta-analysis, ongoing research suggests that effective strategies use data to target action, engage students and families working together to improve attendance, and bring in resources to help those struggling with chronic absenteeism.[120] The particular elements that have been identified as contributing to effective approaches include:[121]

- close, often weekly, measurement and tracking of absenteeism
- the development of a diagnostic capacity to understand why students are missing school
- a problem-solving capacity to help address those reasons
- building and sustaining relationships with the students who are experiencing absenteeism, and often their families
- the development of a multi-sector and community response (which can often involve a second group of adults in the schools to meet the scale of the challenge)
- efforts to recognise and reward good attendance
- a commitment to learn what works, and then to replicate and expand effective programs to modify what is not working.[122]

Measurement and monitoring

Measurement of attendance and absenteeism and appropriate recording of the data is seen as imperative to help identify early warning signs. Making the data publicly available at a school, district and state level is also seen as a key strategy to raise awareness of the issue and accountability.[123] If schools, teachers and parents are provided with on-going real time data on absenteeism then it is possible to flag students for early intervention and support to prevent increases in absenteeism.[124]

Some of the research literature refers to the need to focus on chronic absenteeism, rather than attendance rates or unexplained absences/truancy. Chronic absenteeism typically refers to missing 10 per cent of a school year or more for any reason, including both excused and unexcused absences, making it based on total days missed. Taking into account both excused and unexcused absences is seen as critical because the evidence indicates that it is how many days a student misses that matters, not why they miss them.[125]

Reporting mean average attendance rates is said to mask individual patterns of attendance. For example, an attendance rate of 84 per cent for ten students in one school could mean that each of the ten students was away for 32 days, which accurately reflects the 84 per cent attendance patterns of those students. However, two students may have been away for 160 days each while the

119 Maynard et al. 2013. 'Indicated truancy interventions for chronic truant students: A Campbell Systematic Review.' *Research on Social Work Practice* 23(1): 5-21.

120 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

121 Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. 2012. *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

122 Ibid.

123 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success. Attendance Works.; Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

124 Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. 2012. *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

125 Ibid.

remaining eight students attended every single day, in which case the modal average would be closer to 100 per cent attendance.[126] Furthermore, high overall school-wide attendance rates can easily mask significant numbers of chronically absent students.[127] A school can have average daily attendance of 90 per cent and still have 40 per cent of its students chronically absent, because on different days, different students make up that 90 per cent.[128]

Chronic absenteeism recognises that absences may not just reflect student truancy, but also other factors such as family-related factors or socio-economic factors.[129] Using chronic absenteeism as an indicator, Chang and Romero (2008) note that if chronic early absenteeism is low within a school, then it is more likely to be related to the economic and social challenges experienced by individual families which affects their ability to ensure their children attend school regularly. If there is a large percentage of children affected by chronic early absenteeism, then it is likely to be indicative of systemic issues related to schools and communities.

However, school-wide attendance rates can still assist with understanding the situation at a school. If attendance is low across the school, then it can be an indicator for principals that changes need to be made that involve the whole school, rather than focusing on individuals.[130] Furthermore, school attendance rates impact school climate and subsequently student performance. In schools where absenteeism is more normative, not attending may not be as big a concern as in schools when absenteeism is rare.[131]

Interventions

The research literature shows it is important that interventions are made as soon as absences begin to add up, whether early in a child's education or at the beginning of the school year.[132] Research indicates that a child's onward attendance pattern is largely established in the first years of school, and therefore establishing high expectations about attendance in the commencing years of school or even earlier, along with monitoring and intervention, are likely to yield benefits to onward educational and life outcomes.[133] If absenteeism begins as early as the first grade, it might be more effective to focus efforts on preventing primary school absenteeism to stop the withdrawal from education.[134] However it is also worth identifying the key times that students are more likely to miss

126 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. 2010. What Works. The Work Program. Improving outcomes for Indigenous students. The Workbook and guide for school educators.

127 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

128 Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. 2012. *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

129 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

130 Connolly, Faith and Linda Olson. 2012. Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

131 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

132 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

133 Hancock et al. 2013. 'Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.' Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia.

134 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

school throughout their schooling, such as Year 9, and adopt early warning indicator systems that track attendance to prevent continued absenteeism and potential early exit from school.[135]

Family and community relationships

Developing family-school-community connections has become one of the most commonly embraced policy initiatives in schools and school districts, particularly for primary schools.[136] With regards to the early years of schooling, student attendance patterns are more likely to reflect parental attitudes and behaviours and/or family stability than attendance being the choice of students. Research has demonstrated the positive effect of school/family partnership efforts in improving attendance at the primary school level.[137]

Family-related factors are seen as a logical starting point for interventions because of the high correlation with reasoning for student absences.[138] Families are now being recognised as an important influence on student attendance and an important resource for decreasing truancy and chronic absenteeism.[139] McConnell and Kubina Jr (2014, p255) suggest that "*securing parent involvement in student attendance at an early age will help the family to promote good attendance throughout a student's school career*".[140] Parental engagement in their children's education can have a positive impact on attendance, and there is a flow-on effect through the generations if improved attendance, engagement and rates of completion can be addressed.[141] It has been suggested that strategies should focus on interrupting the family history in which schooling was not beneficial to the student and where education is not valued.[142]

While it is the responsibility of parents to get their children to school each day, schools and communities also have a role to play in recognising and addressing the barriers and challenges that may make it difficult for parents to get their children to school and become involved in their schooling, especially those facing multiple challenges.[143] It is suggested that schools and communities need to actively communicate with and reach out to students and families when children are showing patterns of increased or excessive absence, and assist with developing appropriate responses that reflect the context of the family.[144]

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135 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

136 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

137 Sheldon, Steven and Joyce Epstein. 2004. 'Getting students to school: Using family and community involvement to reduce chronic absenteeism.' *School Community Journal,* 14, 39-56.

138 McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256.

139 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

140 Sheldon, Steven B. 2007. 'Improving student attendance with school, family, community and partnerships.' The Journal of Educational Research 100(51): 267-275.

141 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

142 Ladwig, James and Allan Luke. 2014. 'Does improving school level attendance lead to improved school level achievement? An empirical study of indigenous educational policy in Australia.' *Australian Educational Researcher* 41(2):171-194.

143 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. *Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Centre for Children in Poverty; Sheldon, Steven B. 2007. 'Improving student attendance with school, family, community and partnerships.' The Journal of Educational Research 100(51): 267-275.

144 Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero. 2008. Present, engaged and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Centre for Children in Poverty.

Schools play an important role in promoting attendance by helping parents understand the importance of attendance, particularly in the early years, in promoting academic success. This can be achieved through effective and clear communication through personal contact and outreach from schools to families.[145] Schools and teachers can also have a particularly strong influence on family involvement with the schools and their child's education.[146] Schools that make the effort to communicate with a diverse group of families make gains in attendance, as do those who provide families with a school contact person with whom to discuss attendance or other issues. Home visits can also be effective as a way of reaching out to families and reducing absenteeism.[147]

Providing parents with actionable, real-time data on their children's attendance, as well as an alert about their academic risk if they keep accruing absences, can also help address absenteeism.[148] Research shows that ensuring opportunities exist for direct parent and teacher contact to talk about how the student was going at school, or to raise unauthorised absences and identify how to work together to improver attendance, is a beneficial strategy in improving student attendance.[149] Telephone calls or texts to parents of absent students and the provision of timely information to families about student absences and school policies on absenteeism is a strategy that has been found to help improve attendance.[150]

School environment

A positive school environment also plays a significant part in determining the extent to which students participate and engage in schooling. Schools can promote good attendance for all students with awards, incentives, contest and positive messaging.[151] This approach works by focusing students' attention on their own attendance. Referring students to counsellors to discuss attendance problems also helps students to focus on their own attendance.[152] For large schools, such as high schools, increasing student interactions and decreasing anonymity of students may help, although this may require substantial change, such as portioning a school into smaller academies.[153]

Sanctions

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, which help to build relationships in an effort to decrease absenteeism and reward attendance, are strategies that place a cost on non-attendance. Laws that impose penalties for non-attendance are intended to deter as much as punish, that is, the

145 Ibid.

146 Sheldon, Steven B. 2007. 'Improving student attendance with school, family, community and partnerships.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 100(51): 267-275.

147 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

148 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works.

149 McConnell, Bethany and Richard Kubina Jr. 2014. 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature.' *Preventing school failure* 58(4): 249-256; Department of Education, Science and Training. 2003. 'National report to Parliament on Indigenous education and training, 2002. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

150 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

151 Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang. 2014. *Absences add up: How school attendance influences student success.* Attendance Works; Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

152 Osterman, K. 2000. 'Students' need for belonging in the school community.' Review of Educational Research 70:323-367.

153 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

threat of punishment is intended to encourage compliance so as to avoid the penalty.[154] One study found that the threat of prosecution was enough to make almost two thirds of families take corrective action to avoid prosecution.[155] However, other research has found that the use of court systems does not lead to better attendance for students who have been chronically absent.[156] In a survey conducted as part of the Queensland Auditor-General's 2012 report on student attendance, it was noted that:[157]

> *Approximately 45 per cent of principals surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed that the process to enforce parental obligations for a child of compulsory school age is effective in increasing attendance. Almost half (49 per cent) of principals at Primary schools responded that letters to parents were effective, while only 12 per cent of Secondary school principals agreed.*

Another strategy that places a cost on non-attendance at school includes income management of a parent's welfare payments so that school attendance is attached to Centrelink income support payments, which has been trialled in Queensland through the CYWR and SEAM projects. Critics of this approach claim that it places an unfair burden on children regarding their family's financial wellbeing, and that it defines the problem as one of parental or student negligence.[158] A review of programs in the United States of America that linked welfare payments to school attendance to deter truancy found that, unless the program was accompanied by case management resources, they do not lead to a significant improvement in attendance.[159]

Strategies to improve Indigenous attendance

Research suggests that strategies should focus on the individual students, families, schools and the community, and this applies to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.[160]

The Federal Department of Education, Science and Technology undertook a study which found that Indigenous students who consistently attended school:[161]

- were more likely to think that significant others, especially parents and teachers, strongly wanted them to attend
- believed that positive consequences flowed from them attending school, especially that they would succeed in their school subjects and get a better job
- reported that their teachers were prone to keep in touch with their parents
- claimed that their attendance at school was more rarely affected by them providing help for their families and through their involvement in Indigenous cultural business.

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154 Dickson, Elizabeth and Hutchinson, Terry. 2010. 'Parental responsibility and Australian legislative attempts to curb truancy.' In Hodgson, Stephanie (Ed). The Teaching Profession: Overregulated? (Conference Session 4). The Australia and New Zealand Education Law Association, NSW Teachers Federation Conference Centre, Sydney, NSW.

155 Baker, Myriam, Jane Sigmon and M. Elaine Nugent. 2001. Truancy Reduction: Keeping students in school. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

156 Epstein, Joyce and Steven Sheldon. 2002. 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement.' *The Journal of Educational Research* 95(5): 308-318.

157 Auditor-General of Queensland. 2012. *Report 1: 2012 Improving Student Attendance*. Queensland Audit Office, p29.

158 Campbell, David and Wright, Joan. 2005. 'Re-thinking welfare school-attendance policies.' *Social Service Review* 79:2-28.

159 Ibid.

160 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

161 Bourke, Colin, Ken Rigby and Jennifer Burden. 2000. *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

School environment

School-based factors appear to be of primary importance in understanding and addressing the non-attendance of Indigenous students, with schools needing to be more responsive to the needs of Indigenous students and provide a learning environment where Indigenous students want to attend, learn and succeed.[162] A positive school environment that makes the students feel part of a community is seen as important in encouraging children to attend school involving family and community members.[163]

The literature identifies key school characteristics that can make the school a more welcoming place for Indigenous students and positively contribute to an effective learning environment. These include school leadership, school culture, quality teachers, school curriculum and family and community involvement.[164] As one study noted:[165]

> *Indigenous students can find school with all its concerns about regulation, order, uniforms and timekeeping to be an irrelevant and unwelcome additional strain. On the other hand, if it reaches out to accommodate them, it can be one welcome place of security in their lives.*

Curriculum and teacher quality

Curriculum and teacher quality are seen as two particularly important areas where schools can address non-attendance. The report noted earlier the importance of reflecting Indigenous culture and history in the curriculum and recognising cultural communication and learning styles with regards to the curriculum, as well as teachers being aware of, and being prepared for, teaching in a cross-cultural, bi-lingual situation. This is summed up by Buckley and Purdie (2010) who believe that "*education practitioners and policy makers need to be well versed in the importance of cultural factors in schooling*" and that they "*must continue to develop policy and programs that take account of Indigenous cultures and history, and they must develop expanded understandings of what it means to participate and engage in education*".[166]

Recognising the role of the child's agency in making decisions about schooling, policies that focus on improving positive views towards school rather than forcing children to attend school should also be considered.[167]

Community

Community focused strategies may involve increasing local community involvement in innovations that support school attendance, facilitating youth development and participation as a means of connecting young people with their community, and promoting and recognising community-based

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162 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

163 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

164 Ockenden, Lucy. 2014. Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

165 Groome, Howard and Arthur Hamilton. 1995. *Meeting the needs of Aboriginal Adolescents*. Commissioned report No. 35, Canberra: National Board of Employment Education and Training.

166 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p20-21.

167 Biddle, Nicholas. 2014. *Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth.* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

learning.[168] The Remote School Attendance Strategy is an example of involving community members in strategies to increase attendance and educate families on the importance of regular attendance, as is the Cape York Welfare Reform initiative in Queensland. These are discussed in section 3 of this report.

A range of programs have been developed to increase attendance by providing incentives and rewards, either through schools, community groups or government initiatives. These have included sporting programs, such as the Clontarf Foundation which targets boys through involvement in AFL, school nutrition programs, and "no-school, no pool" policies.[169] Programs have also been developed that aim to build cultural identity and pride as well as promote education. One example is the Community Festivals program, which is a Commonwealth Government initiative that supports events that encourage students, particularly Indigenous students, to attend school and live healthy lifestyles.[170]

It has also been suggested that cross-sector or interagency approaches are needed for Indigenous students due to the close relationship between factors such as education, health and housing that affect absences from school.[171] A focus on all aspects of early childhood that meets the full set of developmental needs of Indigenous children is seen as particularly important to give them the best chance to participate fully in their education.[172] Cross sector or interagency approaches may include providing support to families (with children in the early years) through the development of a whole-of-government early childhood strategy, improving cross-agency linkages, and the implementation of early childhood services.[173] However, there is disagreement on the effectiveness of this approach, with some suggesting it is a common feature of successful programs, while other research has found little evidence of success to support an interagency approach.[174]

Rewards and sanctions

A description of programs that have been implemented using income management as a form of sanction or punishment was provided earlier in this section. Income management is an approach that has been applied to Indigenous populations, including via the School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) program (which includes non-Indigenous people too) and the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial. Policies such as a "no school, no pool" rule, while providing the reward of a swim at the pool, also provide a form of sanction to encourage children to attend school.

168 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

169 Ibid.

170 Ibid.

171 Zubrick et al. 2006. The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People. Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

172 Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

173 Ibid.

174 Reid, Ken. 2008. 'The causes of non-attendance: An empirical study.' *Educational Review* 60: 345-357; Purdie, Nola and Sarah Buckley. 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

3 Government student attendance strategies

The committee reiterates that parents have the primary responsibility and legal obligation for ensuring students attend school. The role for governments is a monitoring and responding one and as part of the response, to aim for schools to be places where students want to be. In Australia both the state and the federal governments have responsibility for education and both have initiatives underway to address student attendance.

3.1 Queensland Government

Every Day Counts is a state wide campaign that aims to assist in improving student attendance at school through promoting a shared commitment by students, parents, caregivers, schools and the community to improve students' attendance at school.[175]

To do this, *Every Day Counts* promotes four key messages:

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

The *Every Day Counts* website includes case studies and tools to help with planning and documenting their approach to improving attendance. The tools include:[176]

- Attendance Policy template
- Attendance Planning Tool template
- Student Attendance Profile template
- sample letter from a school principal to local businesses/community agencies/service organisations
- Sample Attendance and Engagement Agreement template

To assist with managing and tracking unexplained absences and unsatisfactory attendances, the *Roll marking in state schools* procedure and the *Managing student absences and enforcing enrolment and attendance at state schools* procedures were updated after the Auditor-General's review. The department has advised that updates to the roll marking in state schools procedure have provided clarity around use of particular codes, such as those for exemptions, natural disasters and religious observances and clearer guidance on the frequency of uploading attendance data to OneSchool and ensuring that relieving teachers have access to class rolls.[177]

To address absenteeism, the department further clarified its suggested five-step approach, which is linked with both procedures. The five steps are:[178]

- develop a positive school culture

175 http://education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/ (accessed 18 September 2014).

176 http://education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/schools/index.html (accessed 18 September 2014).

177 Public briefing transcript, 6 August 2014, p2.

178 Public briefing transcript, 6 August 2014, p2.

- communicate high expectations of attendance
- record and follow up student absences
- monitor student non-attendance
- provide intervention and support.

The department can also enforce a parent's legal obligation to ensure a child who is of compulsory school age is enrolled and attends a state school or a non-state school, on every school day for the educational program in which the child is enrolled, unless the parent has a reasonable excuse. Enforcing that legal obligation can mean prosecuting parents if their child is not attending school. An authorised officer from either the school or region can seek consent from the Director-General to prosecute for failure to enrol or attend.[179]

It is noted that prosecutions are an action of last resort to facilitate student attendance, and that prior to the commencement of prosecutions, there is a requirement that parents are notified in writing of their obligations, with the intention of holding a meeting with parents to discuss their child's absenteeism.[180]

In addition to these specific strategies, the department has advised it is focused on ensuring high-quality teaching and strong student engagement as a means of improving and maintaining the attendance of students. It supports a multifaceted approach that includes building a positive school environment, effective parent and community engagement, strong teaching practices, addressing student and family mobility, productive behaviour management, and good communication. Approaches that are not specifically focused on increasing attendance, but that the department believes will lift student attendance and engagement include *Great Teachers = Great Results* (which aims to enhance the quality of instruction for all state school students through improved teaching and learning), as well as policies that allow for greater autonomy for schools and new approaches to school discipline.[181]

The state government sees as one of its challenges "*improving learning outcomes for all Queensland students with a widely dispersed population that has significant proportions of vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals*". School attendance is to be used as one of the early warning indicators to identify students at risk of disengaging with learning so that interventions can be made.[182]

Indigenous student attendance

The Auditor-General and the committee's report made reference to, and recommendations about, the department's *Closing the Gap* strategy for Indigenous education. *Closing the Gap* articulated the target of closing the gap in attendance rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2013. In 2011, the Auditor-General found that there had been no change in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates, and no indication that the gap would close by 2013. In 2014, the data shows that the gap continues; although encouragingly, attendance rates for Indigenous students improved more than did attendance rates for non-Indigenous students.

[179] NB The Education and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2014 will, if passed, provide that a regional director may authorise prosecution of parents.

[180] Education and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2014, explanatory notes, p6.

[181] Public briefing transcript, 6 August 2014, p2.

[182] DETE. *Strategic Plan 2014-2018*.

Section 4 of this report presents details of the data in respect of Indigenous student attendance in Queensland.

In 2013 the government released a new strategy for closing the gap in education titled *Solid partners Solid futures: a partnership approach for excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood, education, training and employment from 2013 to 2016*. *Solid partners Solid futures* is the government's action plan for excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood, education, training and employment.[183] It outlines commitments which coincide with the timeframes set for national closing the gap targets. The key principles outlined in the strategy include the following:[184]

- effective engagement and connections which involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development, design and driving of solutions to improve outcomes
- working together better and smarter across government agencies, education providers, communities, business and industry, and with learners, their parents and families to improve outcomes
- cultural capability and recognition which builds on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and identities, with these woven through their learning and education experience
- supporting successful transitions, whether through early childhood development, setting strong educational foundations or providing individuals with skills for the economy, to improve outcomes
- building workforce and leadership capacity in a workforce so that it is prepared and appropriately skilled to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, students, parents and community.

A range of initiatives that include a focus on attendance have been included in the *Solid partners Solid futures* strategy, such as piloting a guarantee of academic success from prep to Year 12 across a range of locations. This is a parent and school partnership approach to drive expectations, including expectations about attendance as well as performance within the school. Another initiative includes individual case management.[185]

3.2 Commonwealth Government

The Commonwealth Government has made attendance at school a high priority for Indigenous children and their families. A range of strategies and programmes have been implemented in an effort to improve attendance and reduce absenteeism of Indigenous students.

The goal is to close the gap on Indigenous student attendance within the next five years, which will be reflected in schools achieving a 90 per cent plus attendance rate regardless of the percentage of students who are Indigenous. Strategies that have been implemented to achieve these targets include the Remote School Attendance Strategy, expansion of the Student Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure, otherwise known as SEAM, from 15 to 23 communities in the Northern Territory, and the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial (in partnership

183 DETE. *Solid partners Solid futures: a partnership approach for excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood, education, training and employment from 2013 to 2016*. https://indigenousportal.eq.edu.au/about/Pages/default.aspx (accessed 26 September 2014).

184 Ibid.

185 Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p7.

with the Queensland Government, the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership and four Cape York communities); and increasing scholarship opportunities for Indigenous students as part of the expenditure in the 2013-2014 budget.[186]

Closing the Gap

In 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a partnership between all levels of government to work with Indigenous communities to achieve the target of *Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage.* Targets have also been built into a range of national agreements between the all Australian governments. The COAG reform agenda is implemented through National Agreements, National Partnerships and other intergovernmental agreements.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) sets out the objectives, outcomes, outputs, performance indicators and performance benchmarks agreed by COAG to achieve the *Closing the Gap* targets.[187] It also provides links to those National Agreements and National Partnership agreements across COAG which include elements aimed at *Closing the Gap*. Under the NIRA, all Australian governments have shared responsibility for *Closing the Gap* across six key areas: life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, literacy and numeracy, education attainment and economic participation.[188]

Each year, the COAG Reform Council reports to COAG on the performance of all governments against the objectives and outcomes of NIRA. In the COAG Reform Council's report *Indigenous Reform 2012-13: Five years of performance - Report to the Council of Australian Governments 30 April 2014,* it was noted that from 2008 to 2012, decreases in Indigenous students' school attendance rates were larger and more widespread than improvements. The gap grew in South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and particularly in the Northern Territory (NT). From 2008 to 2012, in South Australia, the ACT and the NT school attendance by Indigenous students fell in most school year levels and the gap increased. Attendance improved and the gap narrowed in NSW and Victoria. No mention was made of Queensland in the report.[189] Indigenous school attendance rates are to be an ongoing part of the annual reports to COAG on *Closing the Gap*.[190]

The National Education Agreement between the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in relation to education commenced on 1 January 2009. Its objective is that all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy.[191]

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186 Biddle, N. 2014. Developing a behavioural model of school attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth. Canberra: ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.

187 www.coag.gov.au/node/145 (accessed 29 September 2014).

188 http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/health_indigenous/indigenous-reform/national-agreement_sept_12.pdf (accessed 29 September 2014).

189 COAG Reform Council. 2014. *Indigenous Reform 2012–13: Five years of performance - Report to the Council of Australian Governments 30 April 2014.* http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Indigenous%20Reform%202012-13%20Five%20years%20of%20performance_30%20April%202014.pdf (accessed 29 September 2014).

190 Scullion, Nigel 22 March 2014. Media release – *Government expands remote school attendance strategy* http://www.nigelscullion.com/sites/nigelscullion.com/files/mediareleases/2014-03-22%20Joint%20Press%20Release%20with%20Minister%20for%20Indigenous%20Affairs.pdf (accessed on 28 October 2014).

191 https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/20081129_national_education_agreement_factsheet.pdf (accessed 29 September 2014).

In the report *Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance - Report to the Council of Australian Governments 21 October 2013*[192], it was reported there were no improvements in Indigenous school attendance over five years with decreases in some years.

Queensland, along with other states and territories, is expected to show progress toward meeting the six national targets to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians as part of the *Closing the Gap* strategy.

The targets relating to education are:[193]

- Ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013)
- Halve the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018)
- At least halve the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates (by 2020).

Remote School Attendance Strategy

As part of the approach to improving attendance, the Remote School Attendance Strategy commenced in Term 1 2014 in partnership with communities and schools in 73 locations in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. It is designed to be driven by the community to suit local needs and involves people in each of the remote communities being employed as school attendance officers to work with schools, families, parents, and community organisations to ensure all children go to school every day. A community plan is developed to identify ways to ensure all children in the community go to school every day, and may include:

- talking to children and families about the importance of regular school attendance
- working with families where children are not attending school to find out why and what can be done to help them get there
- providing practical support like driving children to school or helping to organise school lunches, uniforms, homework and after-school care
- working with the school to monitor attendance and follow up on student absences
- celebrating and rewarding improved attendance.[194]

Due to the recent commencement of the strategy, no evaluations have yet been undertaken to assess its effectiveness.

The Commonwealth government has indicated in late 2014 that it will move to impose financial sanctions on parents whose children have unsatisfactory school attendance, under the program.

Cape York Welfare Reform trial

Cape York Welfare Reform (CYWR) is a partnership between the Commonwealth Government, Queensland Government, and Cape York Institute. It is a package of policy reform designed to address the deterioration of social and economic conditions in Cape York Indigenous communities

192 COAG Reform Council. 2013. *Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance - Report to the Council of Australian Governments 21 October 2013* http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Education%20in%20Australia%202012,%20Five%20years%20of%20performance.pdf (accessed 30 September 2014).

193 https://www.coag.gov.au/closing_the_gap_in_indigenous_disadvantage (accessed 30 September 2014).

194 https://www.dpmc.gov.au/indigenous_affairs/remote_attendance/index.cfm (accessed 7 October 2014).

that has occurred over recent years. CYWR is being trialled in four Cape York communities: Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge.[195] The centrepiece in the trial's agenda to rebuild social norms in these communities is the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC), an independent statutory authority comprising a Family Responsibilities Commissioner and Indigenous commissioners from each of the four reform communities.[196]

The approach of the FRC is primarily to hold conferences with community members and to encourage clients, individuals and families to engage in socially responsible behaviour whilst promoting the interests, rights and wellbeing of children and other vulnerable persons living in the community. The core objectives of the FRC include safeguarding and restoring child safety, school attendance, lawful behaviour and responsible tenancy. It directly links improved care for children to welfare and other government payments.[197]

The *Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008* (the Act)[198] sets out the statutory obligations of the relevant Queensland departments to notify the FRC when a community member is not meeting pre-determined obligations. In regards to student attendance, principals of schools in a welfare reform community are required to notify the FRC if a student is absent for three full, or part days of a school term without reasonable excuse, or the principal is not satisfied there is a reasonable explanation for the absences.[199]

Once an agency notice is received and determined to be within jurisdiction, it is then referred to the local commissioners for a decision as to whether the client should be ordered to attend a conference. Commissioners may then decide that no action is necessary, reprimand the client, encourage the client to enter into a Family Responsibilities Agreement (FRA), direct the client to relevant community support services or place the client on a Conditional Income Management (CIM) order. Clients who enter into a FRA or are ordered to attend community support services, are case managed by the FRC. Service providers are required to submit a monthly progress report advising if the client has attended and engaged with the provider and the progress they are making towards achieving their goals.[200]

"Income management" means Centrelink will put part of a person's fortnightly payments on a BasicsCard, which can only be used at approved stores and businesses, and can be spent on housing, food, clothing, education and medicine. CIM orders are issued to stabilise a client's circumstances, particularly where children or other vulnerable people are concerned, and can be made for up to one year. CIM orders are also made where a client fails to attend two scheduled conferences, is not complying with their agreement or order, or the FRC is continuing to receive additional notices in relation to their behaviour.[201] Following the evaluation in 2012, the maximum rate of income which can be managed has increased from 75 per cent to 90 per cent, to give local commissioners an

195 http://cyi.org.au/welfare-reform (accessed 7 October 2014), Department of Social Services. 2012. *Cape York Welfare Reform: Evaluation* https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2013/cywr_evaluation_report_v1.2_0.pdf (accessed 7 October 2014).

196 http://www.frcq.org.au/ (accessed 7 October 2014),

197 http://www.frcq.org.au/?q=content/frc-processes (accessed 7 October 2014).

198 https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/ACTS/2008/08AC009.pdf (accessed 7 October 2014).

199 http://www.frcq.org.au/?q=content/frc-processes (accessed 7 October 2014).

200 Ibid.

201 Ibid.

additional tool to encourage those members of the CYWR communities who show significant resistance to measures already placed upon them to comply with orders.[202]

A report evaluating the trial was released in 2012, and found that school attendance has shown a large increase during the CYWR period in Aurukun, the community where rates were the lowest at the beginning of CYWR. Statistically significant improvements in school attendance were evident across two of the four communities from 2008 to 2011 (Aurukun and Mossman Gorge). School attendance rates in Coen stayed high throughout the trial and showed no statistically significant change, while there was a small statistically significant decline in school attendance in Hope Vale over the trial period. The change in Aurukun is greater than in any other Indigenous community in Queensland, and there are indications that it is related to the actions of the FRC. The improvements in Aurukun are not part of a general trend in Indigenous communities in Queensland.[203]

Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM)

The SEAM program attaches conditions of school enrolment and regular attendance to income support payments. SEAM trials have been in operation in six Northern Territory sites involving a total of 14 schools (including nine government schools) since January 2009. An additional six trial sites, including 30 schools, commenced in selected QLD locations during October 2009. Although not Indigenous specific, the SEAM program was being trialled, monitored and evaluated in predominantly Indigenous communities or communities with a relatively high Indigenous population.[204]

In a 2010 evaluation report commissioned by the government, it was noted that SEAM students showed a greater increase in attendance rates than their non-SEAM peers in both the NT and Qld from 2009 to 2010. The increase was due to a decrease in both authorised and unauthorised absences in the NT and a decrease in unauthorised absences in Qld. Issuing attendance notices to parents had a short term impact, especially during the compliance period. While attendance relapse was commonly observed in both the NT and Qld, a small improvement was sustained one to two months after the compliance period for students in the NT and in the month immediately after the compliance period for students in Qld.[205]

Evaluations of the SEAM trial have observed that the trial's impact on school enrolment was unclear, and that while there were some small improvements in school attendance levels, these often proved temporary. In a study on the SEAM program, it was shown that SEAM had a "*substantial, immediate impact: in its first year it triggered an increase in test participation rates of 16-20 percentage points over pre-SEAM levels*".[206] However, the study found that welfare payments were not often withheld from truant families and as this became widely known, participation rates fell off, although they remained above the baseline levels. Hence it is suggested that while a credible threat to link welfare payments to school attendance can have an initial strong influence on participation rates, parents

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202 David Glasgow (Family Responsibilities Commissioner) transcript, 27 August 2014, p5.

203 Department of Social Services. 2012. *Cape York Welfare Reform: Evaluation* https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2013/cywr_evaluation_report_v1.2_0.pdf (accessed 7 October 2014).

204 Purdie and Buckley 2010.

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

206 Justman, Moshe and Peyton, Kyle. 2014. 'Enforcing compulsory schooling by linking welfare payments to school attendance: Lessons from Australia's northern Territory. Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 19/14.

were still not necessarily seeing the value in schooling, and therefore the gains were temporary. The authors concluded that for such an approach to have a long-term effect, the perception of parents about the value of schooling needs to be changed.[207]

In 2012 the Queensland Government elected not to proceed with SEAM as it did not consider that the model had been effective in this jurisdiction.

The committee noted in its 2012 report that the evaluation identified Queensland's lack of consistent triggers for intervention for non-attendance as the reason for a very low rate of referrals for support in this jurisdiction.[208] The committee notes the contrast with the specific trigger of three days absence per term which prompts action under the Cape York Welfare Reform trial.

Smarter Schools National Partnerships

The Australian Government funded National Partnerships for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities, Literacy and Numeracy and Improving Teacher Quality, which ran from 2009 to 2014. These were referred to as Smarter Schools National Partnerships. No further funding is available under these National Partnerships. The Smarter Schools National Partnerships were focused on improving educational outcomes for school students, particularly those students falling behind. Many schools used the funding to help address low levels of attendance and the committee understands from discussions with schools that many of the strategies currently being implemented were a direct result of the partnership funding.

The interim report *Smarter Schools National Partnership Interim Evaluation Summary* undertaken by the Queensland Government in 2011 found that student attendance rates at the National Partnership schools had remained relatively stable since 2008 with the exception of a slight increase in the attendance rates of Year 9 students in schools funded under the Low SES National Partnership.[209]

Stage one of the SSNP National Evaluation covered all the Smarter Schools National Partnerships. No statistics are given on student attendance rates.[210]

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207 Ibid, p6.

208 Education and Innovation Committee, 2012. *Report no. 7 – Review of Auditor-General's report 1: 2012 – Improving student attendance*, p9.

209 DETE. 2010-2011 *Smarter Schools National Partnership Interim Evaluation Summary*. http://deta.qld.gov.au/publications/strategic/evaluation/pdf/interim-evaluation-summary.pdf (accessed 8 October 2014).

210 Atelier Learning Solutions Pty Ltd. 2012. Final Report on Analysis of Activity and Evaluation Effort in the Smarter Schools National Partnerships: Phase 1 of the National Evaluation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships. http://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/phase_1_evaluation_final_report.pdf (accessed 8 October 2014).

4 Data on student attendance rates

Table 1 below shows the state-wide attendance rate over the past five years, from 2010 to 2014. The attendance rate has varied over this time within a range of 0.3 percentage point between 90.8 and 91.1 per cent. However, given the change in methodology in the calculation of student attendance and associated changes to the OneSchool system in 2013, it is difficult to undertake a direct comparison across the five years. However it seems likely the pre-2013 figures were overstated, and so an improvement has occurred since then. The new methodology provides a more accurate reflection of student attendance than data collected in previous years. Of greater interest is the difference between the attendance rate in 2013 and 2014 because the new methodology was used in both years. The data shows a 0.3 percentage point increase in attendance with 91.1 per cent in 2014, compared to 90.8 per cent in 2013.

Table 1: Queensland State School Attendance Rates 2010 - 2014[211]

	Year				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
State Attendance Rate	91.00%	90.90%	91.10%	90.80%	91.10%

Table 2 below shows the overall attendance rate at primary schools and high schools between 2010 and 2014. There was a slight increase of 0.3 percentage point in the attendance rate between 2013 and 2014 at primary schools, which reflects the increase in the overall rate of attendance for the state.

Of particular interest is the increase in the attendance rate for state high schools in 2014 to 89.1 per cent from 88.5 per cent in 2013, which reflects an increase of 0.6 percentage point between 2013 and 2014. Furthermore, the difference between state primary school and state high school attendance rates in 2014 is the lowest it has been across each of the comparison years, with a difference of 3.0 percentage points.

Table 2: Queensland State Primary and State High School Attendance Rates 2010 - 2014[212]

School type	Year				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
State primary school	92.30%	91.90%	92.20%	91.80%	92.10%
State high school	88.30%	88.60%	88.60%	88.50%	89.10%

Figure 1 on the next page shows the overall student attendance rate distribution in five per cent increments for 2013 and 2014. The figure shows that in general there has been a slight decrease in the number of students with an attendance rate of 90 per cent or less, as well as in the 95.01 to 99.99 per cent category, and an increase in students with attendance rates between 90.01 to 95 per cent and students with 100 per cent attendance. It is also worth noting the increase in students with an attendance rate of less than 0.01 per cent. This may be as a result of students moving school or enrolling in another school, with enrolment remaining current at their former school.

211 OpenData WP 1400-11 and WP 1400-12.

212 OpenData WP 1400-12.

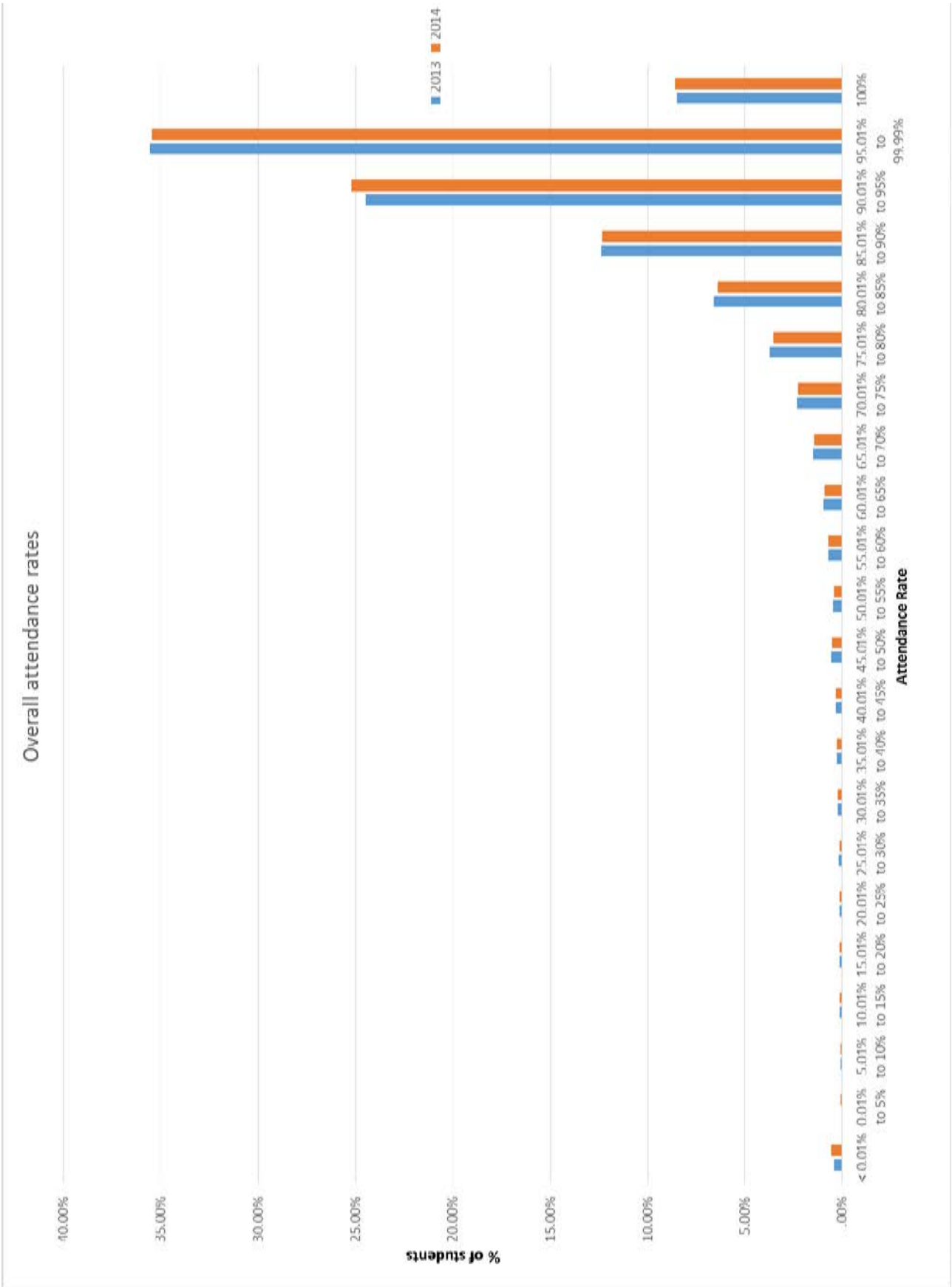

Figure 1: Overall student attendance rate distribution[213]

[213] Attendance rate by EQID provided by DETE, analysed in Qlickview and documented in WP3100-24.

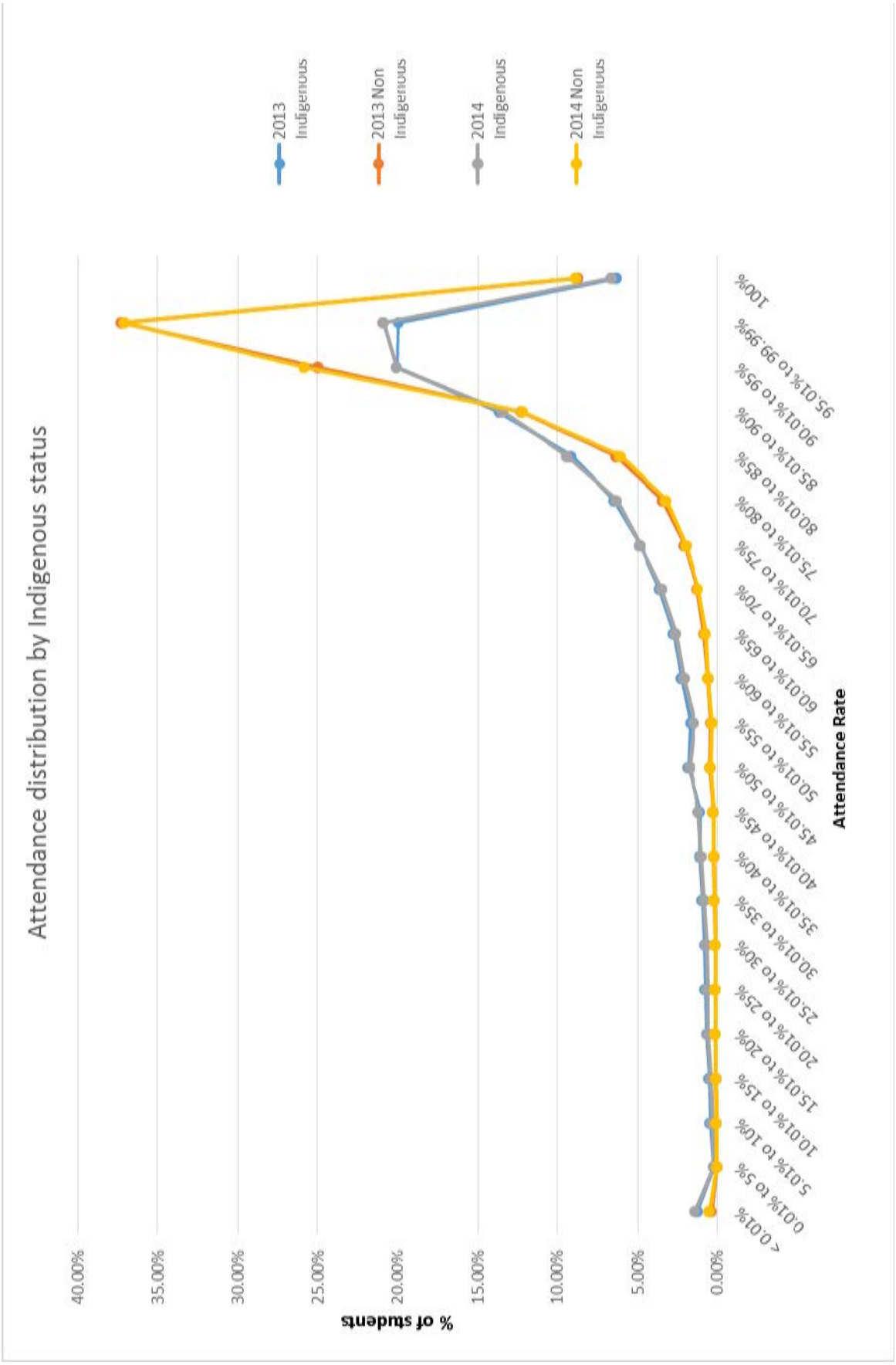

Figure 2: Attendance distribution by Indigenous status[214]

[214] Attendance rate by EQID provided by DETE, analysed in Qlickview and documented in WP3100-23.

Figure 2 on the previous page shows the Indigenous student attendance rate distribution in five per cent increments for 2013 and 2014. The figure shows the attendance rate for Indigenous students is lower than the rate of attendance for non-Indigenous students. However, on a more positive note, the proportion of Indigenous students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or more has increased from 59.9 per cent in 2013 to 60.9 per cent in 2014. In comparison, the proportion of non-Indigenous students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or more was 83.2 per cent in 2013 and 83.9 per cent in 2014.

Figure 3 below shows the percentage of students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or higher in each year level from the Preparatory year to Year 12 across the state's primary and high schools for 2013 and 2014. The figure clearly shows that primary school year levels have better attendance rates than high school year levels.

Each year level shows an increase in the percentage of students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or higher in 2014 from 2013, except for Year 7 which showed a significant decrease in attendance at -1.05 percentage point, from 84.3 per cent to 83.2 per cent. Interestingly, in 2013 there were 41,723 students in Year 7, while in 2014 there were 27,860 students in Year 7 due to the half year cohort that were the first preparatory students in Queensland.

In both 2013 and 2014 there was a marked decrease in attendance rates from Year 9. However, it is also worth noting that the Year 9 cohort, which is typically a year when attendance declines, showed a significant increase of 1.05 percentage point from 2013 to 2014. The attendance rate then picks up again in years 11 and 12, with the Year 12 cohort of students showing an increase of 1.47 percentage point.

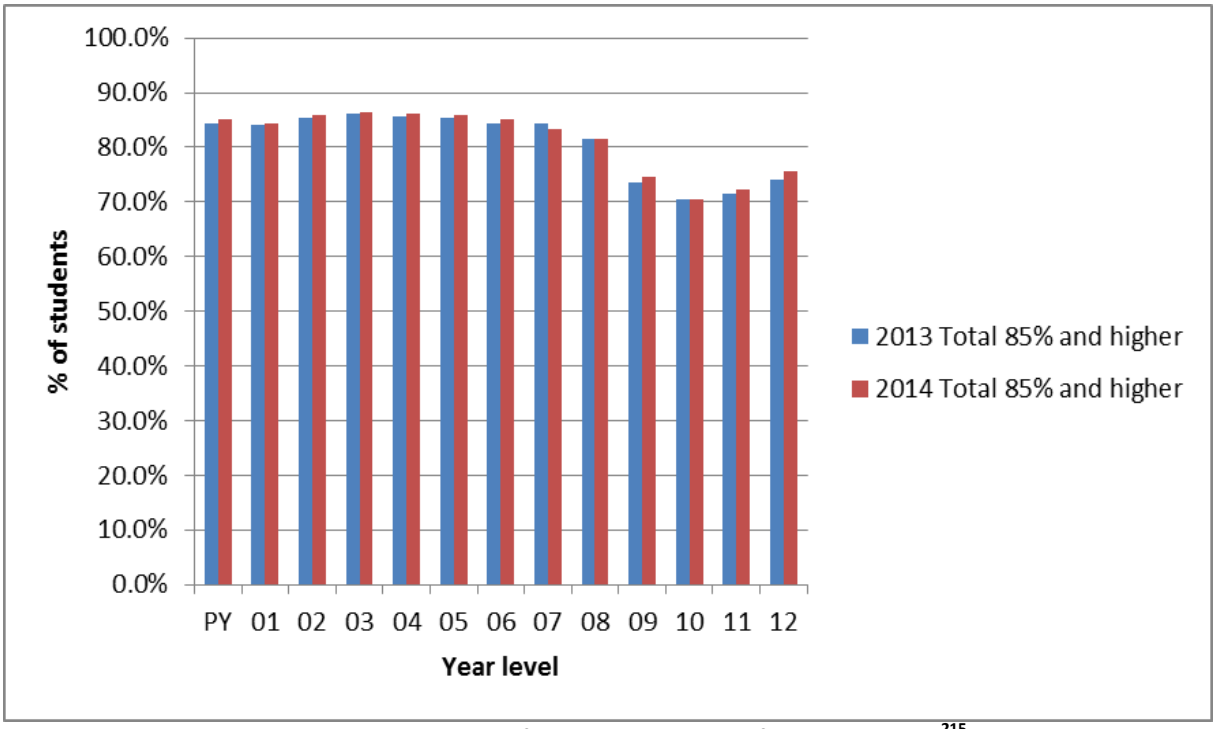

Figure 3: Attendance distribution by year level for attendance rate of 85% and above[215]

[215] OpenData WP1400-11 and WP3100-25.

Figure 4 below shows the percentage of students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or higher in each of the state's regions. Overall attendance rates differ by region; the Metropolitan region has significantly higher attendance rates than the other regions in both 2013 and 2014, while the North Queensland and Far North Queensland regions. This correlates with the proportion of Indigenous students in the regions.

The Metropolitan region had the highest percentage of students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or higher in both 2013 and 2014, with 86.0 per cent and 86.2 per cent respectively. Far North Queensland had the lowest percentage of students with an attendance rate in these brackets, with 72.8 per cent and 72.9 per cent respectively. All regions showed an overall increase in attendance except for North Queensland which saw a slight decrease of -0.01 percentage point. The South East region showed significant improvement; the proportion of students attending 85 per cent of the time or more has increased by a full percentage point, from 80.9 per cent to 81.9 per cent.

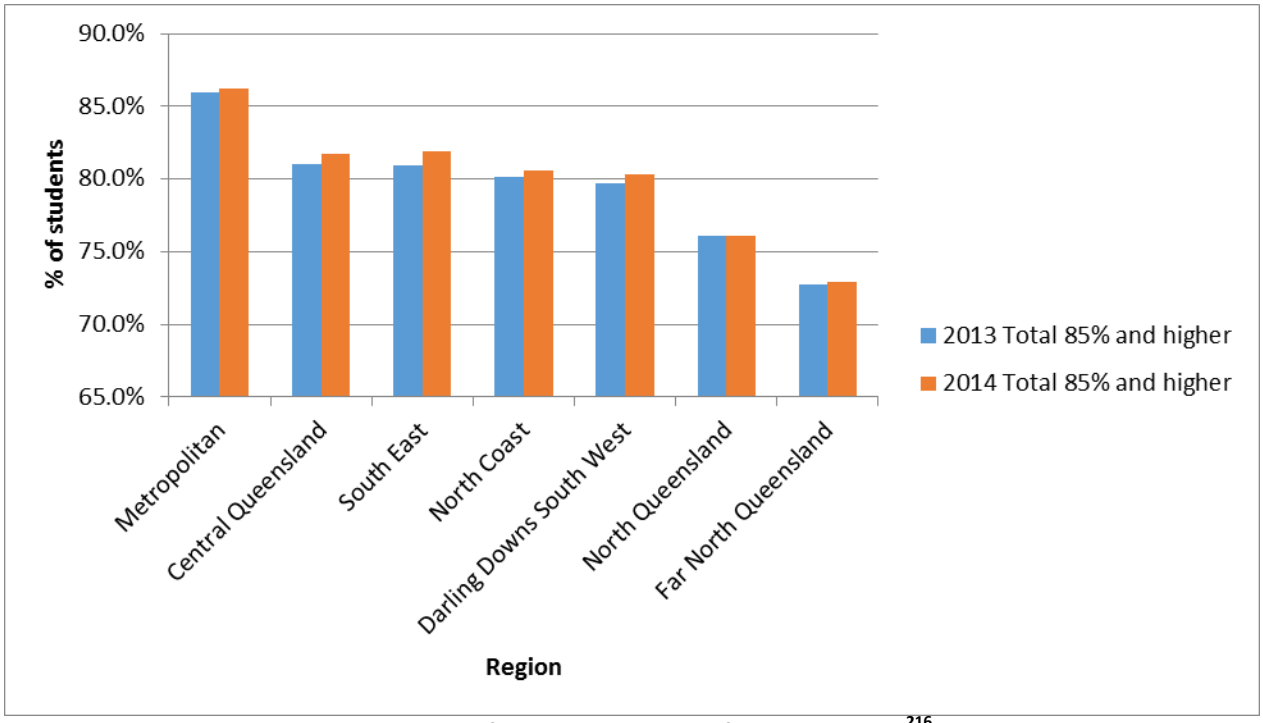

Figure 4: Attendance distribution by region for attendance rate of 85% and above[216]

Figure 5 shows the percentage of students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or higher in each of the bands that represent school size in Queensland for 2013 and 2014, with Band 5 containing the smallest schools and Band 11 containing the largest schools. Schools in Band 5 showed an overall increase of 1.0 percentage point, which reflects the belief that attendance is higher in smaller schools. Interestingly, a more significant increase of 1.4 percentage point was seen in Band 10 schools. Schools in Band 7 and Band 9 experienced a decrease in the proportion of students who had an attendance rate of 85 per cent or higher.

[216] OpenData WP1400-12 and WP3100-25.

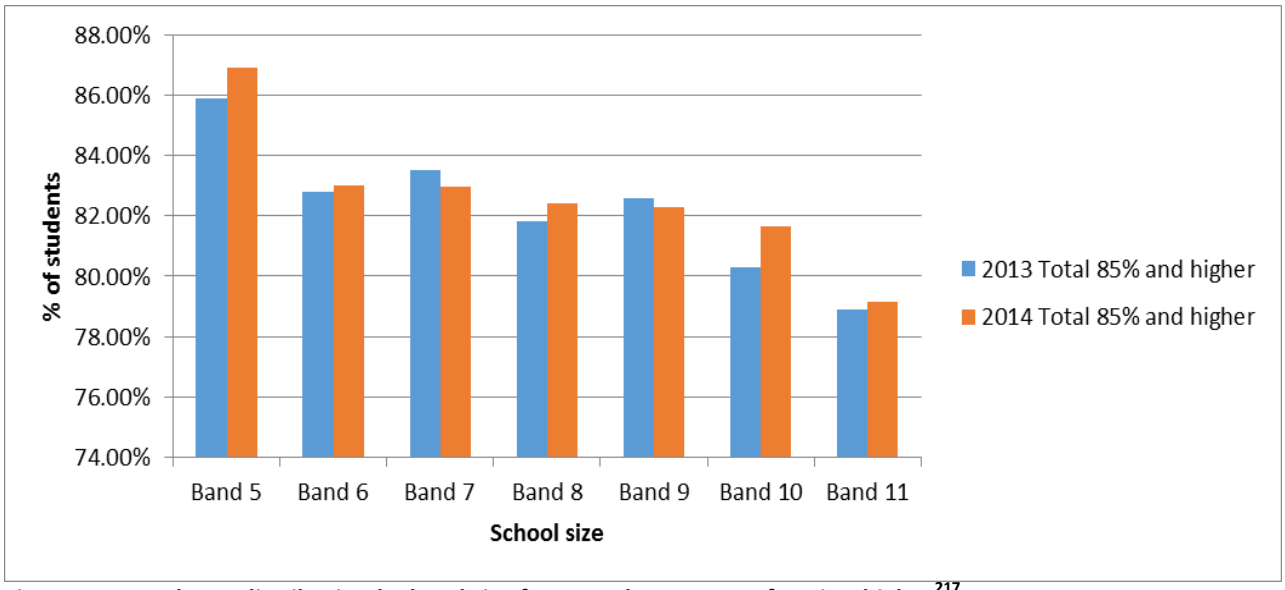

Figure 5: Attendance distribution by band size for attendance rates of 85% or higher[217]

Semester one 2014 data as illustrated in figure 6 shows the main reason for absence state-wide was "illness", followed closely by "unexplained". There was an overall downward trend in "unexplained" absences, including for Indigenous students. However the "other" absences are trending up. There is also a marked jump in "disciplinary" absences (that is, where a student is suspended) in Year 9, and in "unexplained" absences in Year 11.[218]

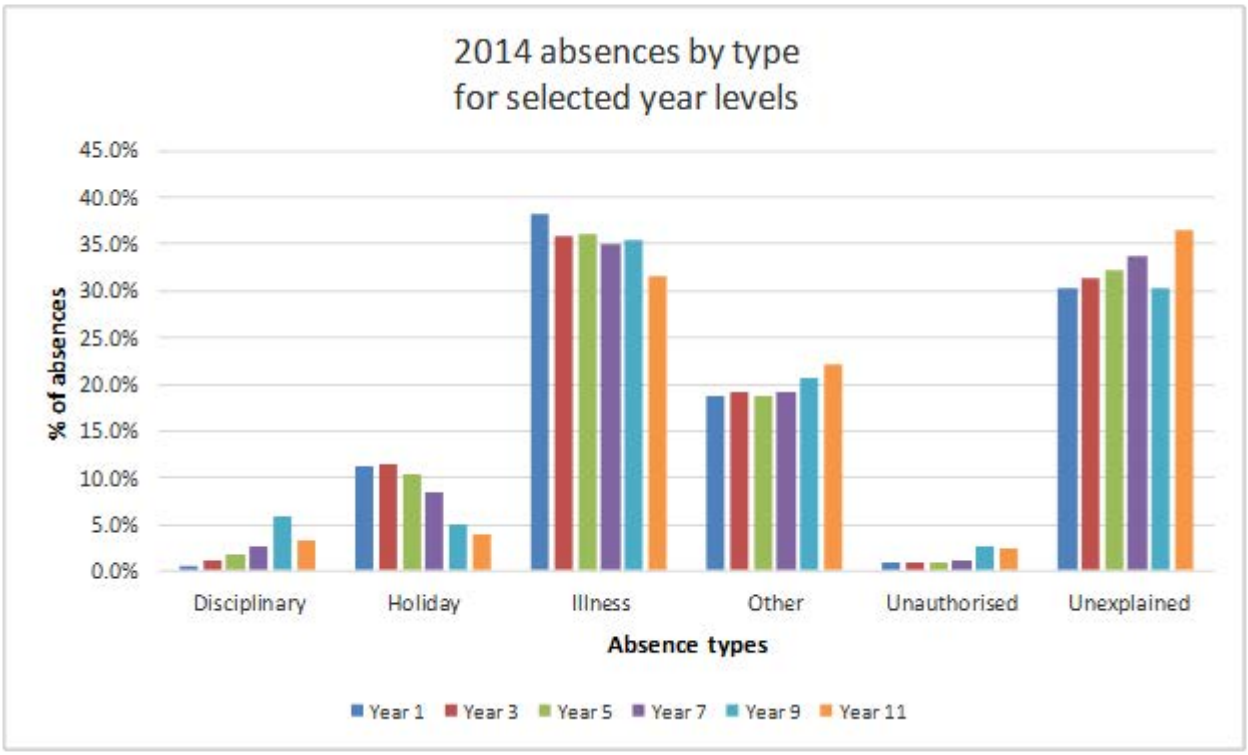

Figure 6: 2014 absences by type for selected year levels.[219]

[217] Attendance rate by EQID provided by DETE, analysed in Qlickview and documented in WP3100-25.

[218] OpenData 2014 absence by reason and student demographics.

[219] Ibid.

5 Government response to 2012 recommendations

5.1 Government response to Auditor-General recommendations

The committee considered the government's response to the Auditor-General's 2012 report and to advice provided by the department as to its implementation, or otherwise, of the Auditor-General's recommendations, to inform this section of the report.

Auditor-General recommendation 1:

That the department revise its guidance, procedures and systems to include:

- a clear definition of unsatisfactory attendance
- a consistent approach for schools to manage and track actions to follow up unexplained absences
- a consistent approach to manage and track interventions of unsatisfactory attendance.

The department has revised its guidance and procedures with regard to definitions, attendance monitoring and tracking tools and processes available to help schools, and updated its roll marking procedure. This has given schools clarity about the use of particular codes for reasons for absence.

Definition of unsatisfactory attendance

The department maintains the position that attendance for all students should be 100 per cent unless they have a reasonable excuse such as illness. It cautions against setting "*an arbitrary threshold at which non-attendance becomes unsatisfactory*" as this is contrary to that position;[220] and may be viewed as a tolerance of absences up to that threshold.[221] This contrasts with South Australia, which has an attendance rate target of 93 per cent. New South Wales and Victoria focus on continuous improvement without nominating a specific target.

In February 2014, the Prime Minister announced a target to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student attendance rates within five years, with the former to match the average national attendance rate of 90 per cent attendance for all students.[222] Commonwealth government strategies aiming to achieve this are discussed further in section 3.2 of this report.

The Auditor-General and the committee both considered this issue in 2012, the committee suggesting that while "every day counts" is a valuable message, a non-publicised "trigger" for action by schools (ie when attendance by a particular student is below a nominated level) could help to ensure relevant students are identified and supported.

Department policy was, and still is, that schools identify when:

- a student is absent for three or more consecutive days
- has a pattern of unexplained absences
- an attendance rate is reasonably considered unsatisfactory.

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220 Government response to Education and Innovation Committee report no. 7, p3.

221 Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p2.

222 Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Hansard 12 February 2014, p 156. http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansardr%2Fd5f2441d-bbaa-47cd-9b30-b2e54878e868%2F0018%22. Australian Government, Closing the Gap Prime Ministers Report 2014. http://www.dpmc.gov.au/publications/docs/closing_the_gap_2014.pdf (accessed on 3 November 2014).

The Auditor-General highlighted in 2012 that the lack of a clear definition about "triggers" for action meant they were inconsistent between schools, which affects the quality of the data used to make decisions about attendance strategies but more importantly, increases the risk that some students with an objective unsatisfactory attendance rate (such as less than 85 per cent), and including chronic absentees, may not be identified and supported to attend school.[223]

In 2012 regional offices identified schools that had attendance rates below the state average. Aside from inconsistencies about what "reasonably considered unsatisfactory" might mean in different schools, the relatively clear trigger of three consecutive days of absence could mean a student was absent four days in one week, attending school on the Wednesday – playing the system. Ultimately, the Auditor-General found evidence that the lack of consistent definition of unsatisfactory attendance "*does not identify chronic absenteeism of individual students*"[224] – and that 36,000 students missed school for 20 or more days in semester one of 2011.[225]

The department's position continues to be that to establish a specific trigger sends a message that any attendance in excess of that trigger is satisfactory when in fact, the target is 100 per cent attendance for every student. However, the improved guidance and procedures with regard to definitions, attendance monitoring and tracking tools and processes available to help schools (such as the OneSchool Performance Dashboard, see below) supports identification of and intervention for students with unsatisfactory attendance.[226]

Auditor-General recommendation 2:

That the department increase the range of OneSchool reports to help schools identify and monitor students with attendance below a state-wide minimum standard of attendance.

While there is no state-wide minimum standard of attendance other than a goal of 100 per cent, the department has advised that the OneSchool system released a performance dashboard in mid-2012 to allow school staff to better monitor school attendance. Since late 2013 that information has been available to teachers at a classroom level.[227]

The dashboard allows schools (and teachers) to analyse absence and attendance information by student group, year level, and time period (term, semester and year to date). Individual students or groups of students may be targeted and identified by: Attendance Rate (%); Attendance Category (< 85%, 85 - <90%, 90 - < 95%, 95 – 100%); or Attendance Rate Range (5% and 10%) including students with 100 per cent attendance.

The dashboard also supports investigation of trends such as:

- days of the week with the highest levels of absenteeism (usually Mondays and Fridays)
- times of the year in which attendance is lowest (e.g. end of term, around public holidays)
- year levels, gender and cultural groups with the poorest attendance.[228]

223 Auditor-General of Queensland. 2012. *Report 1: 2012 Improving Student Attendance*. Queensland Audit Office, chapter 3.

224 Ibid, p2.

225 Queensland Government, Queensland Audit Office, 2012.

226 Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p2

227 Ibid.

228 DETE, Fact Sheet: Monitor Student Attendance. http://education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/docs/monitor-student-non-attendance.pdf (accessed on 3 November 2014).

Patterns of attendance can now be identified, which supports the development of specific strategies to address unsatisfactory attendance at individual schools, and within individual classrooms.

Auditor-General recommendation 3:

That the department provide schools with access to a range of materials and evidence-based strategies to increase attendance and case manage chronically absent students.

In addition the improved OneSchool system (see Auditor-General recommendation 2 above), schools, parents and the community have access to the department's *Every Day Counts* website which provides material and resources promoting attendance and provides advice and ideas on how to manage chronically absent students.

The committee observed that the website contains more material than it did in 2012, and the campaign appears to be well organised in terms of its recommended five step approach.

Auditor-General recommendation 4:

That the department assess how effective the process to enforce the Act is in increasing attendance.

In 2012, the Auditor-General found that there was no consistent data retained by the department about students identified as having unsatisfactory attendance; how many parents are referred to regional office for prosecution; and how many parents are charged and prosecuted.[229] This appears to still be the case.

The department has advised that 500 principals surveyed in 2012 had used at least one of the stages towards prosecution in the school year. Slightly less than half of the 500 agreed that initial/warning notices were effective in improving attendance. Comments indicated that many of those found that often issuing a formal warning notice had a positive impact on attendance and that further legal action was not necessary.

Auditor-General recommendation 5:

Revise performance measures to include a focus on chronically absent students and publicly report progress against all student attendance performance measures.

Individual schools can identify chronically absent students through OneSchool views and reports. Schools report student attendance distribution in their annual reports, with historical data, so that progress can be assessed. A de-identified example is provided below:[230]

[229] Auditor-General of Queensland. 2012. *Report 1: 2012 Improving Student Attendance*. Queensland Audit Office, p24.

[230] Note that the methodology for recording attendance changed in 2013 and so care should be taken when comparing with previous years.

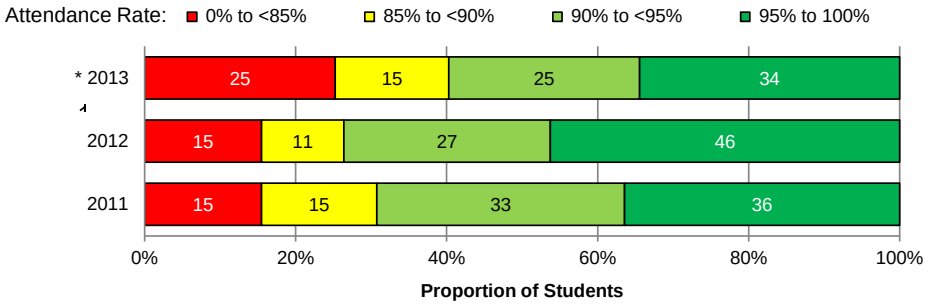

Figure 7: Example of information provided in annual reports

Schools also detail how they manage student non-attendance in their annual reports. At the school level, then, the capacity to identify and manage chronic absenteeism exists.

Auditor-General recommendation 6:

Improve the quality of the 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 (e.g. in the Collections System) are also made to the source system data.

The department has advised the committee that since the 2011 audit and 2012 Auditor-General and committee reports, there has been national agreement to ensure the reporting of attendance rates is comparable between Australian states and territories. As part of this agreement, National Standards for Student Attendance Data Reporting have been developed. In 2013, the department changed the student attendance collection processes to ensure it was consistent with these new standards. The process was repeated for the 2014 collection.

The standards focus on the compulsory year levels (Year 1 – 10), but in addition to these year levels, the department also collects and reports attendance for Prep and Year 11 – 12 students so as to provide a complete picture of student attendance in Queensland state schools.

The DETE Performance Measures Data Dictionary only contains measures that are reported in the service delivery statement, annual report, strategic plan, National Partnerships and/or DETE's performance report.

Validation logs

Processes used for the collection and reporting of student attendance no longer provide the ability for the department to make post collection changes. While validation is still undertaken to improve the quality of the information, all identified changes are actioned by the schools themselves through the OneSchool attendance module. OneSchool has audit logs of changes made, however, the department is unable to differentiate between changes initiated by validation and those initiated by normal school practices.

5.2 Government response to committee recommendations

The committee made four recommendations in its 2012 report. The government responses to the recommendations are outlined below, along with advice from the department as to implementation.

Committee 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.

The government response to the committee's report advised the Parliament as to the government's acceptance and otherwise of the Auditor-General recommendations, and implementation plans in respect of the accepted recommendations. The department provided updated information about implementation to the committee during the course of this review.[231]

The government's responses to and implementation of the Auditor-General recommendations are detailed in section 5.1 of this report.

Committee recommendation 2:

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

The Parliament noted the committee's intent to review state school attendance rates in 2014, when it noted the committee's report. The government also acknowledged the intent in its response to the committee's report. This report is the outcome of that review.

Committee 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.

In response to the committee's third recommendation, the department referred to a research report on attendance that was published in 2013, which was prepared by its data analytics committee. The report, titled *Performance insights: school attendance*, included investigation of national and international research on the effectiveness of strategies to improve school attendance. A key finding was that there was little research into the effectiveness of attendance strategies – a finding that had been highlighted by the committee in its 2012 report and which prompted the committee's recommendation. The report did not indicate that there had been any evaluations of attendance strategies underway in Queensland.

In addition to the report, throughout 2012 and 2013 the department used attendance data to identify a number of schools with significantly improved or high levels of attendance. Some of these schools were then consulted regarding the strategies they had in place for improving and maintaining attendance. As a result of these discussions, interviews with key staff at six schools were filmed and

[231] Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, pp2-3.

were made available for staff on the department's intranet portal. In addition, case studies on strategies used by schools that had strong attendance records in 2012 or had achieved significant improvements were published or linked to the *Every Day Counts* material.

Committee 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.

In terms of the committee's fourth recommendation, no particular advice was provided by the department on any changes to evaluation and reporting processes for the *Closing the Gap* strategies in relation to student attendance.

In 2013 DETE released its new strategy for closing the gap in education titled *Solid partners Solid futures: a partnership approach for excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood, education, training and employment from 2013 to 2016*. It is through this strategy that Queensland aims to meet the COAG-agreed *Closing the Gap* targets in respect of education and employment outcomes for Indigenous people (see section 3).

The action plan supporting the strategy aims to build a continuous pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders from "crayon to career".[232] This means ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders are supported and engaged in learning from early childhood education and care, through to schooling, training, tertiary education and employment. A range of initiatives that include a focus on attendance have been included.

[232] Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p7.

6 Committee 2014 review findings

6.1 2014 school attendance data

The committee is very pleased to note the overall improvement in state wide attendance rates from first semester 2013 to 2014. It seems likely there has also been an improvement from 2012 to 2014 however this cannot be substantiated because of the change in data collection methodology after 2012.[233] It seems likely to be the case that attendance rates were overstated prior to 2013, in which case there has also been an improvement since 2012.

Queensland's state school attendance rates are similar to those in other Australian jurisdictions, with the national average attendance rate around 90 per cent. A comparison with other states is not the issue: the issue is the disparity between attendance rates for different populations of students – notably, the available data tells us, Indigenous students, students in low socio-economic status school communities, and in rural and remote areas. Education is the key to social and economic participation and its lack compounds disadvantage. This is not good for the individual, or for our society.

It is very pleasing to see that there has been a greater increase in attendance rates for Indigenous students than for non-Indigenous students from 2013 to 2014, although the gap between attendance rates for those groups still remains wide. The proportion of Indigenous students with an attendance rate over 85 per cent has increased from 59.9 per cent in 2013 to 60.9 per cent in 2014. This compares with 83.9 per cent of non-Indigenous students attending school for 85 per cent or more of the time in 2014 (83.2 per cent in 2013). Reasons for the improvement in attendance rates, both for Indigenous students and for all students, are not clear.

As was noted by the Auditor-General in 2012, improvements in attendance rates are not uniform. While there is an improvement at the state-wide level in 2014, some schools have declining attendance rates.

Looking at the sub-cohorts within the population of students who have attendance rates above 85 per cent, it can be seen that almost every region, except for the Darling Downs South West region, experienced a drop in the percentage of students who had an attendance rate of 95 to 99 per cent, while in each of these regions there was an increase in the percentage of students with an attendance rate of 90 to 95 per cent. The Central Queensland, South East, Darling Downs South West and Far North Queensland regions also experienced an increase in the 100 per cent bracket. The North Queensland region saw a drop in attendance in the 100 per cent and 95 to 99 per cent brackets, with 0.6 per cent and 0.8 per cent respectively, but saw a respective increase of 1.4 per cent in the 90 to 95 per cent bracket.

What this suggests is that an increase in the proportion of students attending more than 85 per cent of the time may have increased, but looking at that proportion alone, and at the state-wide level, will mask that attendance rates amongst those students could be moving downwards in some regions – just not down below 85 per cent. Of course it is also true that they could be moving upwards, and this is demonstrated in some regions with an increase in the 100 per cent bracket.

[233] Changes in data methodology, including more consistent directions to schools as to collecting the data, commenced in 2013. Consequently 2014 attendance data can only meaningfully be directly compared with 2013 attendance data.

At the year level, Year 7 in 2014 is notable for an apparent decline in attendance rate compared with the Year 7 cohort in 2013. The attendance rate for Year 7 in 2013 was 84.3 per cent and in 2014, 83.2 per cent. Each other year level shows an increase in the percentage of students with an attendance rate of 85 per cent or higher in 2014 from 2013. There are two striking features about the 2014 Year 7 cohort: one is that it is significantly smaller than the usual Year 7 cohort size due to the change in school starting age and implementation of Prep in 2002 when this cohort started school; and the other is that this cohort is the last one to complete Year 7 as a part of their primary school education. Year 7 will be the first year of secondary school in Queensland from 2015. Many Year 7 students have already transitioned to secondary school this year in schools piloting the move, or are in P-12 schools with middle schools. Without further investigation though, the cause of the decline in attendance rate for this Year 7 cohort is not clear.

In both 2013 and 2014 there was a marked decrease in attendance rates from Year 9 – typically a year level in which attendance rates decline. The 2014 Year 9 cohort showed a significant increase of 1.05 percentage point from 2013 to 2014, though the rate is still lower than for other year levels. The attendance rate then picks up again in Years 11 and 12, with the attendance rate of the Year 12 cohort showing an increase of 1.47 percentage points. It is unclear to the committee what might have influenced the increase in Year 9 attendance rates in 2014.

Interestingly, there are significant differences in attendance rates between some neighbouring schools, which suggests there is something happening at the school level to impact on the attendance rates, rather than factors relating to socio-economic status of the regional population. For example, the five primary schools in one large regional town have overall attendance rates ranging from 88.5 per cent to 93.8 per cent in 2014. While in smaller schools the impact of the attendance rates of just a few students can impact fairly significantly on the overall attendance rate, five percentage points is a big difference. In larger neighbouring secondary schools such a variation would not be expected when community socio-economic and geographic factors are the same. Three neighbouring state high schools in a metropolitan area had attendance rates varying from 92.3 per cent to 95.3 per cent - again, this seems like quite a significant variance, when on the face of it, they have similar school populations.

As noted by the Auditor-General and by the committee in their 2012 reports, a state-wide attendance rate masks the full picture; and the lack of a formal evaluation strategy makes it unclear whether there are particular initiatives underway in some of those individual schools that are impacting on attendance or whether there are issues with data collection.

This raises the question of what processes are in place to validate data used to calculate attendance rates. This is discussed in section 6.2 below.

Regional level attendance rates are now published in the department's annual report.[234] This helps to show some of the picture behind the state-wide attendance rate. School-level data is available on the government's *Open Data* website. Targets are not published, as they are set at the individual school level, if a school chooses to do so. The school may or may not publish the target. The committee considers that centralised reporting of targets and acknowledgement of attendance rates could help to support the efforts being made by schools, and in fact encourage continued efforts by schools to work with parents and communities to improve attendance rates. The reporting

[234] DETE, 2013-14 Annual Report, p39. http://deta.qld.gov.au/publications/annual-reports/13-14/pdf/dete-annual-report-2013-14.pdf (accessed on 7 November 2011).

process could also acknowledge likely factors impacting on improvements and declines in attendance rates at a school and regional level, such as (for example) the impact of flooding in a regional town on the ability of students to attend school; or the impact of a dedicated attendance officer who liaises with parents and the community. This could inform evaluation of initiatives designed to improve attendance rates.

The committee will be interested to see whether the results in 2015 will continue to reflect an increase in attendance rates. We commend schools and the department for the overall improvement in attendance rates in 2014, and look forward to continuous improvement.

The committee would be interested to see a broad evaluation of trends in attendance rates at the school, regional and state-level, as part of informing an evaluation of the strategies used to increase attendance rates.

Recommendation 1

That attendance rate targets be established and reported at a school and regional level, and reflect the social, economic and geographic context of that school and region.

6.2 Systems

It seems likely that the enhancements to the OneSchool system, along with new approaches to guidance and procedures with regard to definitions, attendance monitoring and tracking tools and processes available to help schools, and an updated roll marking procedure has given schools greater clarity about the use of particular codes for reasons for absence. This should improve the quality of the data which is available to inform decision-making about interventions.

While a changed data collection methodology in 2013 impacted on recorded attendance rates that year, a consolidation of twelve months increased consistency in data collection in 2014 may have contributed to the improved 2014 attendance rates. Data collection factors include roll marking procedures, guidance to teachers as to definitions of different types of absences, and timing of uploading class and school data to the centralised OneSchool system.

Triggers for intervention

The committee notes the government's continued position that "every day counts" and so establishing an attendance threshold of anything below 100 per cent is not appropriate. Members also note the continued policy and procedural advice to schools that they should intervene when a student has unsatisfactory attendance. Unsatisfactory attendance, that is, the trigger for intervention, is defined as being absent without explanation for three consecutive days, or where another unsatisfactory pattern of attendance exists. Examples are given as to what a school might consider unsatisfactory attendance, but it is largely left to each school to determine. Schools themselves establish target attendance rates below 100 per cent which perhaps begs the question of what is the value of the department level emphasis on 100 per cent attendances in terms of improving attendance rates?

It is also notable that the SEAM evaluation found the lack of consistent triggers impacted on how effective the program was in Queensland; and that the CYWR sets a specific trigger for action in the reform communities (see section 2.4 of this report).

The resources provided to schools suggest that they:

> *Consider the data for patterns of absence that the school considers needs further attention, such as 3 or more consecutive unexplained absences; 5 unexplained absences in a year; 2 Fridays or Mondays as unexplained absences; or an attendance rate below the school's attendance benchmark in the previous year.*[235]

While differences between schools in their approaches to managing unsatisfactory attendance may be entirely appropriate given their different student and teacher populations and environmental contexts, the lack of a consistent definition of when to intervene (other than the trigger of three consecutive days of unexplained absence) mean that students can fall through the gaps in monitoring systems. The committee retains its position that a consistent trigger for intervention would help to ensure that some students do not fall between the gaps; or that different expectations about attendance are applied to different schools or different students, to a student's ultimate disadvantage.

This relates to the advice the committee heard from Dr Chris Sarra of the Stronger Smarter Institute about the dangers of setting different expectations for Indigenous students than for other students: this perpetuates a victim status and low expectations.[236] The same may be true for other groups of students, such as students with a disability, who have consistently poorer educational outcomes than students without a disability; however the data is not available to the committee to assess this.

Despite the lack of a consistent trigger for intervention, the committee notes advice from the department that the OneSchool information management system now provides flags that draw attention at the school level to individual student attendance of 95 per cent, 90 per cent, 85 per cent, and below 85 per cent and that "*[t]his allows principals to focus their attention on unacceptable levels of student absence*".[237]

The schools visited by the committee during this review clearly felt very supported by this capacity, and by the OneSchool system in general. They actively used it to monitor, set targets and motivate both teachers and students towards improving attendance rates. Teachers and principals spoke enthusiastically of the data they can obtain, and demonstrated to committee members how they use the data to motivate and create incentives for students to improve attendance.

Patterns of attendance can now be identified, which supports the development of specific strategies to address unsatisfactory attendance (however the school defines that). Examples of patterns referenced by school staff with whom the committee met informally included higher rates of absences on Fridays and Mondays. There can be locally specific reasons for these, such as ferry timetables to enable families to shop for supplies in town; and higher rates of absence on sports days (though the converse was true in other communities which place a high value on participation in sport).

Strategies included the class and individual students monitoring their own attendance rates with incentives for improvements at the end of each week; competitions between classrooms (again with prizes as incentives); holding activities popular with the students who had unsatisfactory attendance on days with typically low attendance; and making participation in extracurricular activities

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235 DETE, Record and follow up student absences guideline. http://education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/docs/record-follow-student-absences.pdf (accessed on 6 November 2014).

236 Transcript of proceedings, 10 September 2014, p6 and elsewhere.

237 Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p2.

contingent on attendance. The committee observed that individual classrooms in individual schools had established their own attendance rate targets – for example, aiming for 93 per cent attendance by students in that classroom. Incentives of pizza parties or ice blocks on a Friday afternoon if attendance rate targets were achieved, supported a "team spirit" with students encouraging each other to attend. This was at the primary school level.

It was observed at other schools that, consistent with the data, students from Year 9 and Year 10 typically have the lowest attendance rates. Different strategies would be required for that group. The committee heard that using social media and mobile telephone technology was considered effective: for example, the school attendance officer sending text messages to students on a public holiday reminding them that school was on the next day; the use of Facebook to remind parents and students about school activities that week; and teachers calling parents to ask if the child was ready and then attending a student's home to collect the student. We understand the potential embarrassment factor alone had quiet an impact in respect of that latter strategy.

Absence types

The committee notes the advice from the department as to Auditor-General recommendation 1 that it had improved guidance to schools as to defining different types of absence, giving schools clarity about the use of particular codes in OneSchool.

> *Schools were informed and reminded of these changes through the weekly schools update newsletter and annual back to school update. The five-step approach for addressing absenteeism was also revised to provide greater clarity for schools and linked with both procedures.*[238]

The committee agrees that the information provided to schools about absence types is clear. However, whether it is being applied consistently in schools is not so clear.

The increase in "other" absence types in 2014 indicates that there may be some inconsistent understanding about definitions. Schools visited by members referred to slightly different approaches to recording data about absences – for example, whether an absence for any health related issue, which could include caring for another person, was due to "illness" or "other". In any event, the nature of absences being recorded as "other" would seem worthy of some exploration – perhaps a new category of absence is required, so that monitoring and responses of such absences can be tailored.

The committee also notes that there is an impact on attendance rates where students remain enrolled at a school when they do not attend at all, because they have moved away from the area; or have chronic ill health and are not able to attend. Some schools indicated that when measuring their own achievements towards targets, they will remove from the calculations the attendance of a student who has been absent in that manner. However the student will still be included in calculations of the school's attendance rate as reported in OneSchool. The 2014 data indicates 2.2 per cent of all students have attendance rates less than 30 per cent; and 0.64 per cent of all students have attendance rates of less than 5 per cent. This is likely to reflect students in the situation described above, and obviously impacts on overall attendance rates.

[238] Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p2.

The committee suggests ongoing advice should be provided to schools in respect of the definitions of absence types, in the context of ensuring an ongoing focus on attendance and the policies and procedures supporting it, throughout the state education system.

Data validation

The issues raised above in respect of absence types, and in section 6.1 in respect of significant variations in attendance rates between neighbouring schools, leads to the question of what data validation occurs for the OneSchool data entered by schools. This was raised by the Auditor-General in 2012, with recommendation 6 relating to improving the data validation process. Members note the department's advice that although validation does occur centrally, all identified changes are actioned by schools themselves. The department is therefore not able to ascertain whether the change resulted from the validation process picking up an error, or the school making the change of its own accord.

To ensure that the data is of a high quality, and that schools are using the system consistently, there are a number of questions remaining about data validation. These include:

1. Is the validation process documented? (methodology, size of the sample, criteria, etc)
2. How many Semester 1 2014 records are in the system?
3. How many Semester 1 2014 records were validated?
4. How are the records selected for validation?
5. How many validated records resulted in a change request?
6. How does the department know whether the schools actioned the change requests?
7. Has the department identified trends or systemic issues through its validation process? If so, what has the department done as a result?

OneSchool attendance data would be a key source for any evaluation strategy that might be developed to assess the effectiveness of programs designed to improve attendance. Good data is required for valid evaluation results.

Recommendation 2

That advice about recording data in OneSchool, including the definitions of absence types, is promoted on an ongoing basis through the weekly schools update newsletter and the *Every Day Counts* website.

Point for clarification 1

The committee requests that the Minister include in the government response to this report, advice as to the data validation queries raised above.

Chronic absenteeism

The committee is pleased to see that schools are using the OneSchool system functionality and reporting on student attendance in their annual reports.

It was interesting to see that while schools report the levels of student attendance below 85 per cent, and then in three incremental bands above 85 per cent in their annual reports, the data

is not reported in that form at the regional or state-wide level. The committee considers this depiction of the data is very helpful for ensuring a focus on the chronically absent students, who are at greatest risk of missing out on an education. The chart (an example is on page 50) clearly shows that there is a group of students who are at particular risk of serious disruption to their education. Strategies which focus on moving students up towards 100 per cent attendance are not likely to impact on that group.

The colour scheme adopted (traffic lights) for the charts in schools' annual reports gives an implicit indication of what constitutes satisfactory attendance. The red, under 85 per cent attendance category draws attention to this group.

Regional level attendance rates are now published in the department's annual report.[239] This helps to show some of the picture behind the state-wide attendance rate.

It was clear to the committee that some schools tailor targets for attendance so as to decrease the proportion of students with attendance rates below 85 per cent (the red portion in the "student attendance distribution" graph in each school's annual report, above). This helps to ensure a focus on reducing chronic absenteeism at the whole class, or whole school level. The effort by schools and teachers where there is a focus on individual students who are chronically absent was particularly striking. School staff are making considerable effort to work with students and families at the individual level and the committee commends staff for this. It was clear that this effort was, in the main, on top of the expectations of a core classroom teacher role.

However, it is not clear that this effort is explicitly supported in a system that focuses on reaching the highest of attendance rates. Like students who can "game" the system and avoid interventions for poor attendance due to inconsistent triggers for intervention, the efforts of schools and teachers can also fall through the gaps. The setting of targets measurements has far reaching effects on what actually gets done. It is only the dedication of our teachers that ensures the focus of efforts to improve attendance is not just at the "top end".

A demonstrated focus on chronic absentees at the systemic level would support the effort by schools and teachers. It would send a message that the department recognises that these students warrant particular effort and that decreasing the proportion in the "less than 85 per cent attendance" category should be an explicit target for schools.

The department's annual report could include the student attendance distribution information currently used in the annual reports of schools to highlight this focus, at a statewide level.

The committee notes that the provision of OneSchool data on the government's Open Data portal supports keeping the issue of school attendance highlighted in the broader community. A number of recent media articles relating to disciplinary absences demonstrate the public use of this data.[240]

The system improvements are clearly providing significant benefit not only to teachers and schools are who are entrusted with monitoring and supporting attendance but also, it seems likely, to students as reflected in improved attendance rates in 2014.

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239 DETE, 2013-14 Annual Report, p39. http://deta.qld.gov.au/publications/annual-reports/13-14/pdf/dete-annual-report-2013-14.pdf (accessed on 7 November 2011).

240 Queensland Government, Open Data, https://data.qld.gov.au/dataset/school-disciplinary-absences (accessed on 28 October 2014).

Overall, the department is commended for the enhancements made to OneSchool, and schools are commended for their embracing of the possibilities the system now offers them. Teachers are putting in an inordinate effort to support students to attend school – an effort which should rightly be shared by parents and the broader community.

Recommendation 3

That the Department of Education, Training and Employment report each year in its annual report the proportion of students in each attendance rate category including the less than 85 per cent attendance category.

6.3 Strategies

Every Day Counts is the department's overarching strategy to support schools in improving student attendance rates. Essentially, *Every Day Counts* is an awareness campaign supported by resources for schools, and for parents and communities.

The committee has observed that the *Every Day Counts* website has more content than it did in 2012, and that it is better organised. It includes video resources, fact sheets, research data, case studies, and stories about strategies used in different schools. The website is also tailored to the two different audiences: schools, and parents and community.

The department's policies and procedures in respect of attendance are part of the material on the webpage; as are guidelines for schools. The *Every Day Counts* website also details the strategy which goes beyond the school's reach – the legislative enforcement process – referral to which is the "last resort" strategy most schools have to address unsatisfactory attendance.

It is schools themselves who develop and implement the specific strategies that aim to improve attendance rates, within the context established by the departmental policies and procedures.

While the website is a useful collection of material relating to school attendance, there is still a lack of evidence-based resources available to support schools to develop strategies that work. An evaluation of strategies aiming to improve school attendance rates is required to create that evidence base.

School-based strategies

The committee notes the consistent messages across the research evidence (as detailed in section 2) and the conversations held during this review, about school attendance. Key messages include:

- Educational disadvantage is most likely to be experienced by students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, students in rural and remote locations, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities, learning difficulties or other special needs. Attendance is therefore most important for these groups, who often lack the compensatory resources available to those who are more advantaged
- Attendance gaps start early – by Year 1 – and carry on into secondary school, potentially leading to early exit from school. Early intervention is critical
- The most effective strategies use a multi-modal approach, focusing on the school environment (including relevant curriculum offerings and timetabling), engaging families and communities, and recognising and responding to cultural and community contexts
- Supporting student attendance takes effort.

At-risk populations

It is pleasing to see that the *Every Day Counts* campaign outlines a five-step approach which includes establishing a positive school culture as the first step. *"Making school a place the kids want to be"* was perhaps the strongest message heard by the committee in its conversations with schools and experts during this review. Similarly, the *Solid Partners Solid Futures* strategy for improving Indigenous education outcomes focuses on the relevance of schools, including cultural relevance, to Indigenous students. The committee notes that a number of current government strategies should have a positive impact on student attendance in that respect, including *Great teachers = Great results*. Teacher quality is widely recognised as the most important determinant of learning (and presumably, of students being sufficiently engaged to learn).

The committee considers that given there are particular groups identified as being at particular educational risk from unsatisfactory attendance, it would be helpful to provide some specific tailoring of the *Every Day Counts* strategy to those different groups. This could include, for example, highlighting what factors should be taken into account for small children as opposed to Year 9 and 10 students, strategies that may have made a difference with Indigenous students, or students in rural and remote communities with particular challenges of distance and geography.

Early intervention

Every Day Counts could also highlight the importance of early intervention – not just in the early primary school years but at key transition points such as the start of high school, where new habits are forming. The decline in attendance rates for Year 7 in 2014 as indicated by the data suggests a focus on this group is warranted (though as noted, the reason for the decline is unclear).

Given that evidence suggests attendance habits are formed very early on, it would seem that raising parental awareness of the importance of school attendance should start before formal schooling commences. The committee notes the shared jurisdiction of the Queensland government in respect of early childhood education and care, responsibility for some aspects, such as Child Care Benefit and Rebate, quality and regulation resting with the Commonwealth government. Members also note the efforts of successive Queensland governments with respect to promoting the benefits of kindergarten attendance to parents, and the subsequent increase in kindergarten enrolment rates to an all-time high in this state. We note with some concern the cessation of Commonwealth government funding to support universal access to kindergarten at the end of 2014. Kindergarten is vitally important in preparing children for school, including the early formation of attendance expectations: and it is most important for those children who can least afford to attend.

Multimodal responses

One of the barriers identified to a multimodal response, was a lack of partnership arrangements with community support services. Committee members gathered that many schools have informal relationships in which they make referrals of families to community support services, and share information as provided for under legislation with other service providers (such as the Department of Community Services), but formalised holistic support packages around students and families seem less common.

Obviously resourcing, both of schools and of government and non-government community support services, would be a key reason for that. However, it might be possible to explore a greater use of mechanisms such as memoranda of understanding (MOUs) as part of a case management approach, whereby the responsibilities of each agency can be better met through working collaboratively.

For example, a school might provide some flexible learning options for a student who is a caregiver to a parent with a mental illness, while another service might provide some housing support and yet another, mental health support to the household. This could make the difference between the student staying engaged at school, or dropping out. It might also help to share the cost so that schools are not trying to use education resources to manage issues that have not been dealt with by other sectors, and most importantly, so that our students have the best chance for positive social and economic outcomes in their lives.

Recommendation 4

That the government refine the *Every Day Counts* campaign to tailor it to specific groups (based on age, location or indigenous status) with low attendance rates.

Recommendation 5

That the government support the development of a suite of strategies focused on primary school children and children in the first year of secondary school and their families, to address attendance rates at the point when attendance habits are being formed.

Recommendation 6

That the government investigate ways that early childhood programs can promote attendance by increasing parent awareness of the importance of attendance, helping families overcome barriers to attendance and develop the routines for regular on-time attendance.

Recommendation 7

That the department and individual schools implement formal arrangements for support provision with service providers such as social workers and health care providers, to enable a more targeted and holistic response to the issues of students with chronic absenteeism.

6.4 Resourcing

As the committee has noted above, improving student attendance takes effort. Recognition of the work that schools and others do to support students to attend school is required through adequate resourcing. There are clearly many models that are being used to try to improve student attendance rates, from large scale programs such as the Commonwealth's Remote Schools Attendance Strategy and Queensland's Cape York Welfare Reform, to individual school based initiatives. Behind each model is infrastructure to support it, such as the OneSchool system, *Every Day Counts* resources, student attendance officers, the FRC or community conferencing arrangements.

Some state schools have teachers with primary responsibility for attendance. This might be instead of all or some of their classroom teaching responsibilities. Other schools give this responsibility to administrative staff as part of their duties and yet others have attendance officers employed to focus solely on attendance. In at least one region, a group of schools share an attendance officer position. Whatever the model used by schools to improve attendance, it comes at a cost.

The committee has noted that a number of schools funded under the National Partnership for Low-Socio-economic Status Schools used their funding to develop initiatives designed to increase student attendance (and if not explicitly, most of the funded initiatives indirectly aim to achieve that goal). That National Partnership funding ceases after this year, and schools are concerned about their ongoing capacity to continue the efforts they have been making.

The Commonwealth government has committed $46.5 million to the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy over two years. The Commonwealth and the Queensland governments have committed $46.5 million to the Cape York Welfare Reform program over seven years – though it is important to remember that school attendance is just one part of the CYWR program.

The committee notes that some other jurisdictions are allocating funds to support school attendance, such as New South Wales' Home School Liaison Program, which recurrently funds 136 liaison officers including 26 Indigenous liaison officers; and in New Zealand $4 million per year has been allocated to strategies such as:

- allowing more schools to use electronic attendance registers, enabling them to quickly identify casual truants before they become regular truants
- encouraging more schools to implement the Early Notification System, which automatically sends a text message to parents whose children are missing from school without explanation
- one-off funding of $1.5 million to reduce the time it takes to get non-enrolled students back into school.

The implementation of future attendance strategies may mean that additional resourcing is required. Specific funding to support attendance improvements strategies enables schools to implement strategies to improve attendance, and makes clear that improving school attendance is a government objective.

6.5 Evaluation

There is still a marked lack of academically robust evaluations of initiatives designed to improve school attendance rates, both in Queensland and elsewhere.

The committee notes the department's advice that:

> *In 2014 the department has initiated the development of a survey of Queensland state school principals that will ask principals about their use of attendance improvement strategies and the effectiveness of these strategies. Responses will be matched with attendance data for individual schools. This survey is expected to be conducted in semester 2, 2014.*[241]

While a survey of principals will no doubt provide some useful information, it will not constitute an evaluation of strategies. Queensland, like other Australian jurisdictions, does not appear to have any particular focus on the effectiveness of strategies. In contrast, while also lacking in evaluation, in the US there is at least a high-level acknowledgement that evaluations are needed, with a number of agencies publishing assessments of the effectiveness of school attendance strategies. The US Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has established the model Programs Guide, a database of programs selected to meet certain methodological standards and which have demonstrated effectiveness in decreasing truancy. There are currently 18 truancy programs listed at this time, only one of which is assessed as "effective". Eleven programs are assessed as "promising". Two other agencies in the US operate similar databases, where programs are rated based on the evidence available for the effectiveness of the program.

[241] Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p4.

Indigenous attendance strategies

The *Solid Partners Solid Futures* strategy does refer to evaluation and reporting processes, but little detail is given. We note that the government is due to report on the strategy in 2015, and look forward to that report. The committee in 2012 drew attention to the Auditor-General's finding that there was no process to assess the effectiveness of the range of "locally negotiated, evidence-based initiatives" that were to improve school attendance rates for Indigenous students under the state's *Closing the Gap* strategy; and suggested this meant the department may have difficulty in determining the effectiveness of the funds it expends on attendance strategies under *Closing the Gap*.[242] The committee hopes that *Solid Partners Solid Futures* evaluation and reporting is robust and supports sharing and resourcing of initiatives that work.

Solid Partners Solid Futures initiatives are grouped according to four objectives that reflect the life cycle of a student "from crayon to career".[243] Of most relevance to state school attendance rates are Phases 1 and 2. Phase 1 is *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from 0 to 8 years of age learn, thrive and make successful transitions from home to early childhood education and care and school.*

Phase 2 is *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled, engaged and achieving in school; and progressing at the same rate as non-Indigenous students*.

Initiatives under both of these phases are consistent with the research evidence summarised in section 2 of this report, involving ensuring the cultural appropriateness and relevance of school, engaging with parents and communities, partnerships with teachers, and case management.

The committee looks forward to seeing a closing of the gap in attendance rates for Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students, and to knowing whether improvements can be attributed to the *Solid Partners Solid Futures* initiatives.

Recommendation 8

That the Minister advise the committee about the evaluation and reporting processes attached to the *Solid Partners Solid Futures* strategy, and particularly Phase 1 and Phase 2 initiatives.

Enforcement processs

At a committee briefing on 6 August 2014, the department advised the committee that it "*… is currently considering how red tape can be cut from prosecution processes to make it easier for principals to take action where they deem it necessary*".[244]

Since that time the *Education and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2014* which delegates the ability to commence prosecution from the Director-General, was passed by the Queensland Parliament. The Explanatory notes to that Bill advised that:

> *It is intended that the power will be delegated to regional directors as it is advised that they, in consultation with principals, have access to the detailed knowledge about the student and family circumstances that impact on school attendance.*[245]

[242] Education and Innovation Committee, *Report no. 7, Review of Auditor-General's report 1: 2012 – Improving student attendance,* p9.

[243] Transcript of proceedings, 6 August 2014, p7.

[244] Ibid, p3.

While the advice of and views of principals as to the use of the legislative process to enforce school attendance is no doubt valuable, without objective data to support it it does not constitute a satisfactory assessment of how effective the legal process is to improve student attendance rates.

It is still unclear whether either initial notices or warning notices are effective in improving attendance. It could be that a school decided not to proceed with further enforcement instruments because attendance had improved, or because it was considered inappropriate to prosecute for other reasons. The committee notes that Victoria has not yet evaluated its revised enforcement process, whereby the relevant department directly issues fines, avoiding the court system.

When Queensland state schools do commence the enforcement provisions under the Act (after that is approved by the Director-General), they have the option to create the initial and warning notices using OneSchool. However it is understood that not all schools use the OneSchool system to create the notices. It would be helpful to ensure all schools use the OneSchool system if they are enforcing the provisions of the Act. This will enable the collection of reliable data to add to the evidence base about effectiveness of strategies, and consequently inform policy and practice decisions.

Recommendation 9

That the government explore options for an academically rigorous and independent evaluation of the existing strategies being implemented in Queensland (and perhaps in Australia) to identify common features that lead to success in improving school attendance rates; and identify features or strategies that may work in particular environments or with particular groups (for example, strategies for chronic absentees, for younger children, for students from low-socio-economic backgrounds, for Indigenous students).

Recommendation 10

That all schools enforcing parental obligations under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*:

- create the initial and warning notices in OneSchool
- record the outcome and effect on attendance in OneSchool.

Recommendation 11

That schools be encouraged to include and action monitoring and evaluation plans as new programs or strategies are implemented; and that the evaluations are published to help develop the evidence base to support strategies to improve school attendance rates.

[245] Education and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2014, Explanatory notes, p6.

Appendix A – New South Wales and Victoria

Approaches to managing student attendance in other jurisdictions

New South Wales

The following information was obtained from the website for the NSW Department of Education and Communities and from private correspondence from the NSW Department of Education and Communities.

Attendance rate

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) does not set a specific target attendance rate for the whole of the state. Rather, DEC has advised that the focus is on continual improvement and implementation of initiatives to improve engagement and attendance at the school level. Public Schools NSW monitors school attendance rates in comparison to state attendance rates and discusses the strategies principals have in place to address any identified issue. DEC has advised that the attendance of Aboriginal students is a strategic priority in the *Public Schools NSW Strategic Directions 2012-2014*.[246]

Data collection

DEC does not currently have a centralised source of school-level or student-level attendance data for all schools. Most schools in NSW record their attendance data in an electronic system, either the DEC system known as OASIS or a third party system, with some schools recording attendance in a manual roll. Schools using a third party system are expected to upload data on a regular basis into OASIS.[247]

Approximately 10 per cent of NSW state schools are using a new system to record attendance, and this system will be rolled out progressively to all schools over the next year. Once this has been implemented it will be possible to extract attendance data on a regular basis for analysis.[248]

NSW currently collects aggregated school level data from schools in July (for semester one) and November (which covers term three plus five weeks of term four). Schools review two reports on absences at their school each semester. One report covers all students by gender and by scholastic year and the second report covers Indigenous students by gender and by scholastic year.[249]

Schools are required to develop a process to monitor attendance, and principals must ensure staff are trained in maintaining accurate records of student attendance. Schools provide an "85 per cent report" at Learning and Support Team Meetings so that students with an attendance rate under 85 per cent can be identified, investigated, and if necessary, provided with support.[250]

Strategies

The DEC *School Attendance Policy* requires the principal or delegate to undertake all reasonable measures to contact parents promptly and within two days of an unexplained absence occurring.

246 Private correspondence, 23 October 2014.

247 Private correspondence, 23 October 2014; Department of Education and Training. 2010, *Student Attendance in Government Schools – Procedures*. https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/attendance/sch_polproc/att_proc.pdf (accessed 10 November 2014).

248 Private correspondence, 23 October 2014.

249 Ibid.

250 Ibid.

Contact may be made by using an Absentee Notice – Compulsory School Attendance, by telephone, email or SMS text message.[251]

In addition to the school's monitoring of students, the Home School Liaison Program supports schools to identify and manage attendance issues. The program currently has 110 home school liaison officers and 26 Aboriginal student liaison officers who provide this support. A key role of these officers is to support schools in maintaining accurate records of student attendance in an approved form.[252] This is achieved by:[253]

- conducting attendance process audits
- regularly checking the attendance registers (rolls) of allocated schools, reporting the outcomes to principals and recommending improvements where necessary
- identifying individual students whose attendance is a concern and engaging parents or carers to increase school attendance.

DEC has also established "Educational Neglect as a Risk of Significant Harm" as a concern for mandatory reporting to the Community Services Child Protection Helpline. The Mandatory Reporter Guide defines Neglect Education Habitual Absence as "*The child/young person is of compulsory school age (6 years to current leaving age) AND is habitually absent…Habitually absent is a minimum of 30 days absence within the past 100 school days. However this is context/age dependent*". Furthermore, the guide says that "The number of days should be taken as a guide only".[254] DEC advises that the circumstances need to be taken into consideration and uses the example of earlier action needing to be taken for younger children, as the impact of missing schooling is likely to be much greater the younger the child. Another example is that similar consideration needs to be given to the impact for a child/young person with cognitive disability or learning difficulties.[255]

Strategies to improve attendance are developed and implemented at the school level. Support for schools is available from specialist staff in educational services teams.[256] To assist schools, educational services teams and state personnel, the *School Attendance Policy (2010)*, *Student Attendance in Government Schools – Procedures (2010)* and associated support documents outline the roles and responsibilities, strategies and supports for development and implementation by schools.[257]

Enforcement of attendance

In both the 2012 Auditor-General's report and the committee's report, reference was made to a broader range of legal options available in NSW regarding enforcement of attendance. DEC sees legal actions to compel school attendance as a fundamental component of their school attendance

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251 Department of Education and Training. 2010, *Student Attendance in Government Schools – Procedures*. https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/attendance/sch_polproc/att_proc.pdf (accessed 10 November 2014).

252 Private correspondence, 23 October 2014.

253 Ibid.

254 Department of Education and Communities *Online Mandatory Reporter Guide* http://sdm.community.nsw.gov.au/mrg/investigate/DoCS/en-GB/Attribute~outcome_n~global~global/qs%24s40%40Screens_MandatoryReporting_xint%24global%24global?user=guest (accessed 10 November 2014).

255 Private correspondence, 23 October 2014.

256 Ibid.

257 For example, see Department of Education and Training. 2010, *Student Attendance in Government Schools – Procedures*. https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/attendance/sch_polproc/att_proc.pdf and **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**=

program. Legal actions can only be commenced by the Secretary (equivalent to Director-General) or their delegate. There are two types of legal action available.[258]

The first type of legal action is an application to the Children's Court for a Compulsory Schooling Order. The principal aim of a Compulsory Schooling Order is to assist a family and/or student address the issues that are a barrier to regular attendance. There is no penalty involved. Instead, this approach can be considered an extension of efforts aimed at addressing any issues deemed to be adversely affecting a child's school attendance.[259]

The second type of legal action is prosecution in the Local Court (equivalent to a Magistrate's Court in Queensland). This approach is considered to be an option of last resort, as it imposes a penalty and is therefore not considered appropriate while efforts are being made to assist families and/or students. Prosecution is only undertaken when all other avenues have been exhausted, including an application for a Compulsory Schooling Order.[260] The following table shows the number of legal actions undertaken by DEC since the capacity to obtain a Compulsory Schooling Order was first introduced in 2010.[261]

Year	Children's Court Applications	Local Court Prosecutions
2010	228	48
2011	400	23
2012	521	69
2013	409	210
2014	135*	64*
Total	1494	613

* Please note that 2014 data is incomplete.

There has been no formal review undertaken to determine whether students' attendance rates have improved as a result of these legal actions. However, DEC believes that the number of referrals for prosecution gives an indication of the success rate of compulsory schooling orders, which they see as levelling at a rate of approximately 50 per cent. DEC advises that the rate of referral for second and/or subsequent prosecutions is the only current indicator of the success of prosecutions in restoring school attendance and is currently at a rate below five per cent.[262]

[258] Private correspondence, 23 October 2014.

[259] Private correspondence, 23 October 2014; Department of Education and Training. 2011. *Guidelines for supporting student attendance*. https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/attendance/sch_polproc/HSLOgui09.pdf (accessed 10 November 2014).

[260] Private correspondence, 23 October 2014.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Ibid.

Victoria

The following information is available on the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood's website.

Victoria does not appear to have a target for state-wide attendance, however the Department of Education and Early Childhood (DEECD) collects information on student attendance through extraction of data from their record management system and publishes attendance rates in its annual report.[263]

DEECD have articulated the responsibilities regarding student attendance in the *Education Training and Reform Act (2006)* and the accompanying School Attendance Guidelines. The guidelines apply to all registered schools in Victoria (including non-government schools), parents of compulsory school-aged children and School Attendance Officers (SAOs). The guidelines have been designed to support schools and SAOs to meet their requirements under the Act and the *Education and Training Reform Regulations 2007* and *Education and Training Reform (School Attendance) Regulations 2013.*[264]

The guidelines include:[265]

- strategies to encourage high levels of school attendance and how to improve attendance where an issue is identified
- an explanation of the legal requirements of school-age children to attend school, and the processes required to excuse or exempt their attendance
- procedures for schools to record, excuse, monitor and follow up student attendance in order to meet the requirements of the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*, *Education and Training Reform Regulations 2007* and *Education and Training Reform (School Attendance) Regulations 2013.*
- an explanation of the procedures a School Attendance Officer will follow as required by the Education and Training Reform Act 2006, Education and Training Reform Regulations 2007 and Education and Training Reform (School Attendance) Regulations 2013.

The School Attendance Guidelines are available at http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/attendance.aspx.

Data collection

Government schools must use only the department's student record management system or compatible third party software to record student attendance. The department collects information on student attendance through extraction of data from their record management system and publishes attendance rates in its annual report.[266]

Schools must record student attendance twice per day in primary schools and in every class in secondary schools and record, in writing, the reason given for each absence. The principal determines if the excuse provided for an absence is reasonable, and therefore is an "excused absence" or is not reasonable and therefore is an "unexcused absence", and can use their discretion in making this decision. Principals are responsible for ensuring school attendance data is regularly

263 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/attendancerequirements.aspx

264 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/attendance.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

265 Ibid.

266 Ibid.

monitored and analysed to identify student absence patterns on a school, class and individual basis.[267]

If a parent does not contact the school to provide an explanation on the day of the student absence, the school must attempt to contact the parent of the student within three days of the absence. If an explanation is received, the accurate cause of the absence must be recorded. Schools must advise parents promptly of unexplained absences.[268]

The collected data allows schools to monitor the effectiveness of attendance improvement strategies and provides evidence for any further enforcement proceedings. All schools must also report the annual rates of student attendance for the year to the school community.[269]

Strategies

Schools are seen to play an important role in developing, communicating and reinforcing clear expectations regarding attendance and the shared responsibility amongst schools, students and parents. DEECD advises that schools can promote and maintain high levels of student attendance and participation through developing whole school strategies. According to DEECD, a clear whole-school strategy should:[270]

- articulate high expectations to all members of the school community
- create safe, supportive learning environments where all students experience success through active participation and engagement in purposeful learning
- adopt consistent, rigorous procedures to monitor and record student absence
- implement data-driven attendance improvement strategies
- provide early identification of and supportive intervention for students at risk of poor attendance
- link with local community groups and agencies to maximise program and individual support
- access specialist support for individual students with identified behavioural, health, or social issues
- provide a staged response to non-attendance
- support students to return to school after absences.

A Student Mapping Tool is also available to all government schools and can be used for early identification of students at risk of poor attendance and possible disengagement from school. Once identified as being at risk of poor attendance, students are to be provided with targeted support to improve attendance or address underlying issues. Referral to Student Support Services, a Student Wellbeing Coordinator or a Primary Welfare Officer is recommended.[271]

When a student has been absent more than five days in a term for any reason (indicating attendance falling below 90 per cent), even for parent approved health-related absences, DEECD recommends

267 Ibid.

268 Ibid.

269 Ibid.

270 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/fullattendance.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

271 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/attendancerequirements.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

that schools should consider follow up and improvement strategies. They should also follow up and implement improvement strategies where:[272]

- the absence is having a significant impact on a student's educational attainment, achievement and development
- a student has been truanting (absent without parental consent)
- a parent reports that a student refuses to attend school
- there has been no explanation for the student's absence
- a parent repeatedly fails to provide a reasonable excuse for their child's absence.

Identifying risks of student disengagement from education needs to happen early so that actions can be taken to reduce or avoid the risks of disengagement.[273] If the school is concerned about the nature or frequency of the absences, DEECD advises the school to involve the parents and the student as appropriate in developing strategies to improve attendance, and also work in partnership with community agencies and services[274], but that attendance improvement strategies and interventions must be consistent with other supports and frameworks in place for the student and family.[275]

Enforcement of attendance

The committee noted in its 2012 report the Victorian Government's intention to give power to education officials to fine parents who repeatedly fail to send their children to school rather than going through the courts. This intention has now been realised using the following process.

If a student accumulates five unapproved or unexplained absences in the course of a school year and the school feels that they have exhausted strategies for addressing a student's absenteeism, they may choose to take further action by referring the matter to a SAO. All DEECD Regional Directors have been re-appointed as SAOs by the Minister for Education.[276]

To make a referral to a School Attendance Officer the principal needs to establish that:[277]

- the student has been absent from school on at least five full days in the previous 12 months and the parent has not provided a reasonable excuse for these absences
- measures to improve the student's attendance have been undertaken and been unsuccessful, or are inappropriate in the circumstances
- a parent responsible for the absences can be identified.

When the principal's referral is received, the SAO will investigate the absences and a School Attendance Notice (SAN) may be sent to the family. A SAN should be accompanied by information about the importance of school attendance and the ramifications of failure to comply.[278]

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272 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/improvementstrategies.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

273 Ibid.

274 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/attendancerequirements.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

275 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/improvementstrategies.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

276 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/improvementstrategies.aspx#link36 (accessed 4 November 2014).

277 Ibid.

278 Ibid.

Once a response is received from the parents in relation the SAN, the SAO is responsible for assessing the response to the SAN and deciding whether to accept the explanation.[279] SAOs have discretion about which action to take. They can:[280]

- take no further action
- send an official warning
- issue an Infringement Notice (except for the offence of providing false information)
- commence proceedings in the Magistrates' Court.

If a family does not respond to the SAN or the SAO deems the explanation for the absences as "unapproved", an Official Warning may be issued. DEECD advises that an official warning would be appropriate for the first time a parent fails to comply with a SAN and the information provided in the response indicates there may be special circumstances or exceptional circumstances.[281]

An Infringement Notice would be appropriate when:[282]

- a parent has not responded to a SAN
- a parent has responded giving an explanation that is not a reasonable excuse, and provided no further information about circumstances that may indicate special circumstances or exceptional circumstances, or
- after an official warning has previously been sent to the parent.

An Infringement Notice is a penalty in the form of a fine. Once an Infringement Notice has been sent, the Student Inclusion and Engagement Division, in conjunction with the Legal Division, manages proceedings.[283]

Should a SAO form the view that court proceedings are the most appropriate course of action, they are required to refer the matter to the Student Inclusion and Engagement Division of the department for a final decision.[284]

279 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/attendancenotice.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

280 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/infrignementnotice.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

281 Ibid.

282 Ibid.

283 Ibid.

284 http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/court.aspx (accessed 4 November 2014).

Statement of reservation

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19th November 2014

Statement of Reservation

I am in substantial agreement with the content and recommendations of the Education and Innovation Committee's report no.42 into school attendance rates however I believe the committee has failed to properly consider the resourcing needed to address this issue.

The committee report correctly identifies that there are a range of models being employed by schools to address absenteeism and recognises that these require funding. Throughout the hearing process and committee investigations it became clear that a large number of schools fund their attendance programs through the successful National Partnership Agreement for Low Socio-economic Status Schools. The expiration of this agreement at the end of this year and the lack of leadership shown by the Abbott Government in extending or modifying it is a cause of significant concern for school communities.

I am disappointed that the committee has not recommended the renewal of the National Partnership Agreement or that the Queensland Government at least commit to continuing the current resourcing to schools subject to the agreement beyond 2014. The committee's failure to make such a recommendation flies in the face of the evidence presented to it and the concerns raised by school communities.

Yours sincerely

Dr Anthony Lynham
Member for Stafford