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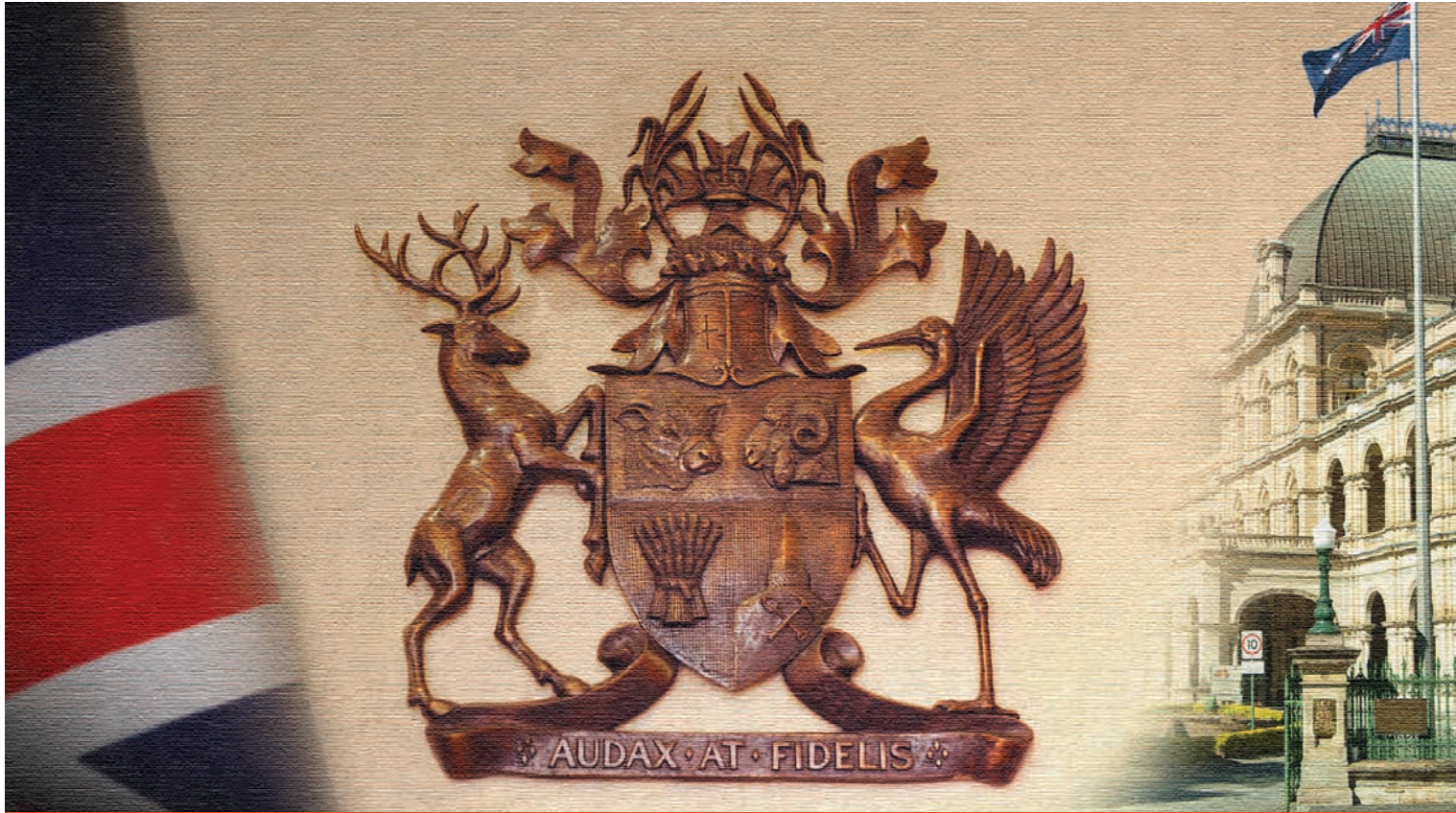# of Queensland

Improving student attendance

Auditor-General
of Queensland

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May 2012

The Honourable F Simpson MP
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Madam Speaker

This report is prepared under Part 3 Division 3 of the *Auditor-General Act 2009*, and is titled *Improving student attendance*.

In accordance with s.67 of the Act, would you please arrange for the report to be tabled in the Legislative Assembly.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Greaves
Auditor-General

Contents

Summary

Audit overview

A key objective of the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (the Act) is to provide high quality education to every Queensland child or young person, and help maximise their educational potential. The Act places responsibilities on parents/caregivers and on the State in relation to the education of children and young people.

Students can be absent for many reasons such as illness, truancy, family holidays or suspension. Parents and caregivers are responsible under the Act for making sure their children attend school and are required to provide reasons explaining every absence. These explanations allow schools to determine how best to support students to attend school regularly and reduce the effects of missed learning. A child with a serious illness will need different help to a child who is disengaged and refusing to attend school.

There is a direct correlation between higher levels of attendance and better academic performance. Increasing student attendance was a key strategy of the Department of Education and Training's (DET) strategic plans in 2009 and 2010.

The *Every Day Counts* initiative launched in October 2008 is designed to increase awareness among parents and students of the importance of attending school all day, every day.

In 2009, the *Closing the Gap Education Strategy* was released. The strategy focuses on improving outcomes for Indigenous students, including attendance.

This audit assessed whether the strategies and initiatives to increase attendance have been effective. It examined:

- the department's approach, policy, guidance and support to schools
- monitoring and reporting of student attendance by state schools and the department.

Conclusions

Strategies and initiatives to improve student attendance state-wide have not been effective. Attendance rates have remained stable, at around 91 per cent, in the four years since *Every Day Counts* was launched. While individual schools have improved, this has not been replicated and sustained more widely at all schools, or for all students. The same applies to Indigenous attendance rates. The gap has not closed and it is not evident it will be closed.

In addressing this challenging area, where it is primarily the parents and caregivers responsibility, the department's performance reports focus attention on schools with below average attendance rates. However, in schools with average or above average attendance rates, there remain a significant proportion of students with unsatisfactory attendance patterns.

Current policies and reports encourage schools to focus on students who are absent three days in a row or whose absences are unexplained. While following up consecutive and unexplained absences is important, this alone does not identify all patterns of unsatisfactory attendance. Not all students with chronic absenteeism, truancy or school refusal are being identified and managed.

The focus now needs to shift to ways of better identifying and managing those students whose attendance is unsatisfactory or persistently unexplained. This requires clearer central direction and guidance, including defining what is a minimum acceptable standard of attendance.

Key findings

Attendance rates

In Queensland, attendance rates are relatively stable, at approximately 92 per cent, during the Primary Years, but start to decline in Years 8 and 9, falling to 87 per cent by Year 10. The department has not achieved its target to improve student attendance rates by 1 per cent each year.

Attendance rates for Indigenous students are on average 7 per cent less than non-Indigenous students. This gap has not reduced and the interim targets toward closing the gap by 2013 have not been achieved.

The department advises schools that chronic absenteeism is 'variously defined' as a student missing more than 10 per cent of the school year, but reports to schools the number of students missing 15 per cent. The year level attendance rates for Semester one are provided once a year and the extent of chronic absenteeism, truancy and school refusal is not monitored or reported.

Departmental regional offices focus their attention on schools with attendance rates that are below the state average. However, this performance data does not identify chronic absenteeism of individual students.

- In semester one 2011, around 115 000 students (31 per cent) in Years 1 to 10 missed the equivalent of at least one day or more of school a fortnight (or more than 10 per cent). Of these, more than half were at schools with average or above average attendance rates.

- The lowest attendance rates are for students in Year 10. For this cohort, 16 970 (47 per cent) missed the equivalent of one day or more a fortnight.

- At one of the schools audited, the school attendance rate was 94 per cent, but 22 per cent of students had missed more than 10 per cent of the year.

The department has policies, procedures and resources to guide schools in how to record student attendance and manage absences and there is a state-wide strategy to improve attendance of Indigenous students. There is however, no clear state-wide strategy to improve overall student attendance. The department is therefore not able to demonstrate how it will achieve its strategic objectives, or the target it set itself in its operational plans, to improve attendance rates by 1 per cent.

Managing students with unsatisfactory attendance

The schools audited are inconsistent in how well they are managing attendance, including how they:

- follow up unexplained absences
- record communication with parents
- produce and use attendance reports
- analyse, monitor and track student absences.

Schools are required to follow up all unexplained absences within three days; however, 33 per cent of the 3 million absences remained unexplained in the student absence database at the end of semester one for Years 1 to 10. When absences are not explained, it is difficult for schools to determine the underlying causes of the absence and distinguish a child who may be genuinely ill from one disengaging from school due to chronic absenteeism, school refusal or truancy.

Of the eight schools audited, four had not identified all students with chronic absenteeism. Some schools focused on students with three consecutive absences rather than total absences. One student identified by the audit had missed 45 per cent of the year. This student had not been identified by the school and therefore was not being case-managed.

Of the eight schools, three had set their own thresholds for 'good' attendance. These schools ran regular reports from the school attendance database identifying students whose attendance was below the school's threshold or minimum standard. These students and their families were then contacted and management strategies put in place.

However, the other five schools relied on the judgment and vigilance of school staff marking and processing attendance rolls, to identify and report to the principal individual students with consecutive or unexplained absences. These schools had not set a minimum attendance standard and were not running reports from the database on cumulative absences or 'unsatisfactory' attendance.

Three of the schools had difficulty generating reports from their school databases showing the number of absences per student for the year.

The department is currently developing a broader range of reports to help schools and regions identity irregular attendance.

Addressing unsatisfactory attendance

While it is the parents' and/or caregivers' responsibility to make sure children attend school regularly, monitoring individual attendance by the school can identify chronic absenteeism, truancy and school refusal, and trigger actions and support from:

- the school
- parents and/or caregivers
- regional office
- counselling services
- police.

The department has developed guidance, procedures and templates for schools to help enforce the compulsory attendance requirements under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*. The policies link to guidance on how to develop local strategies to improve student attendance.

The current procedure and guidance does not set a minimum standard for attendance that can be used consistently by schools to identify students with unsatisfactory attendance. The evaluation by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations of the *School Enrolment and Attendance Management* program in the Northern Territory and Queensland, released in February 2012, identified that having a clear definition of unsatisfactory attendance was a key factor in ensuring students are identified and referred for support.

Determining whether a student's attendance is unsatisfactory, or unexplained absences are persistent, is left to the discretion of the principal. Schools need further advice on how to run reports to identify these students, so that all students who may be at educational risk due to their attendance are identified consistently.

Apart from the awareness raising materials issued in 2008, and some case studies, on the *Every Day Counts* website there are no evidence-based, state-wide programs for schools to adopt or adapt to address the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism. Three of the eight schools examined had developed their own attendance strategies and policies with supporting material, templates and forms that clearly defined unsatisfactory attendance and the issues to be addressed in improving it. These schools were able to consistently identify the students with attendance issues and had agreed approaches on how they were supporting them to improve.

Parents who do not have a reasonable excuse for a student's absence can be prosecuted under the *Education (General Provision) Act 2006*. In 2006, the Act was changed to double the penalty for parents failing to send their children to school. The department prosecutes parents as a last resort. It is the only legal avenue available to principals to enforce the Act: on-the-spot fines, compulsory attendance orders or other less punitive options are not available.

In 2010, only four persons were charged under the Act for failing to meet their parental obligations to ensure their children attended school. Only 27 per cent of principals surveyed agreed this process is effective in increasing attendance.

The department does not collect all the data needed to monitor and assess how effective the process to enforce the Act is in increasing student attendance.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Department of Education, Training and Employment:

1. **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.**

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

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

4. **assess how effective the process to enforce the Act is in increasing attendance.**

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

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.**

Submissions and comments received

In addition to progressive engagement during the course of the audit, in accordance with section 64 of the *Auditor-General Act 2009,* a copy of this report was provided to the Department of Education and Training with a request for submissions or comments.

Department views have been considered in reaching our audit conclusions and are represented to the extent relevant and warranted in preparing this report. The full comments received from the department are included in Appendix A of this report.

1 | Context

1.1   Absenteeism and impact

Attending school regularly is important. Chronic absenteeism can adversely affect a student's education, limiting employment and restricting life opportunities.

The United States National Center for School Engagement considers the integration of attendance, attachment and achievement is critical for a school to be successful (Figure 1A). Improving attendance requires the design and implementation of evidence-based strategies that reduce authorised and unexplained/unauthorised absences. Attachment involves establishing meaningful connections with students and their families. Achievement means that students have the tools and resources to complete their education.

Figure 1A

School success factors
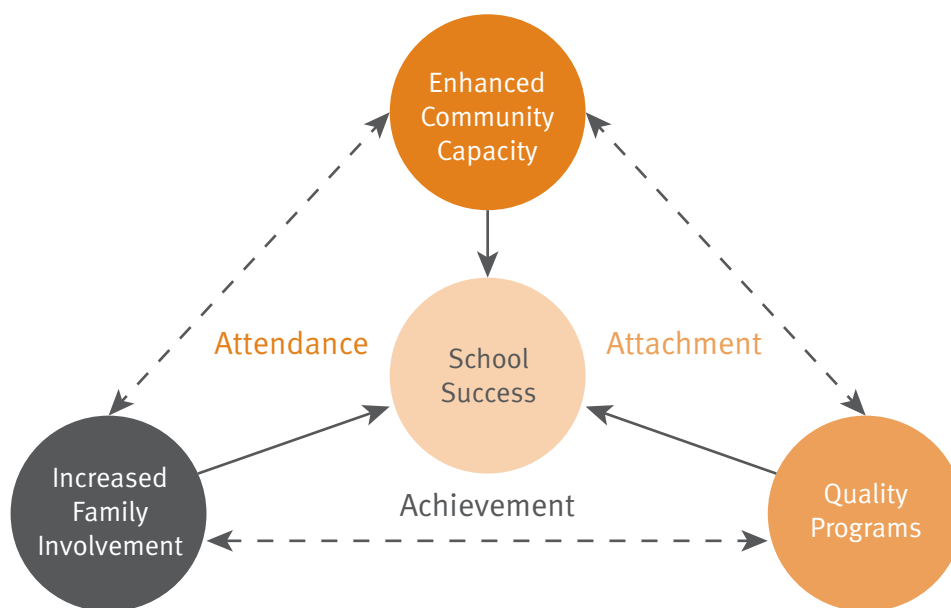
Source: National Center for School Engagement (US)

Reasons for absenteeism

Students may be absent from school for a range of reasons, often for legitimate reasons such as illness. Causes of absences are categorised as stemming from family, school, student and economic/cultural factors (Figure 1B).

Figure 1B

Categories of student absences

```
                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │   Reasons for student   │
                    │    absences from        │
                    │       school            │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
        ┌───────────────┬──────────┴──────────┬───────────────┐
```

School	Family	Student	Economic and cultural
(e.g. relationship between teachers and students, learning styles, level of student support)	(e.g. parental apathy, taking family holidays, family mobility)	(e.g. illness, lack of incentive, lack of school engagement)	(e.g. lack of affordable transport, parents with multiple jobs, cultural celebrations)

Source: United States Department of Justice

Principals surveyed reported that the main causes of absenteeism are related to the family and the student. The top three reasons for being absent are parental apathy, student illness and family issues (Figure 1C).

Figure 1C

Main causes for absences
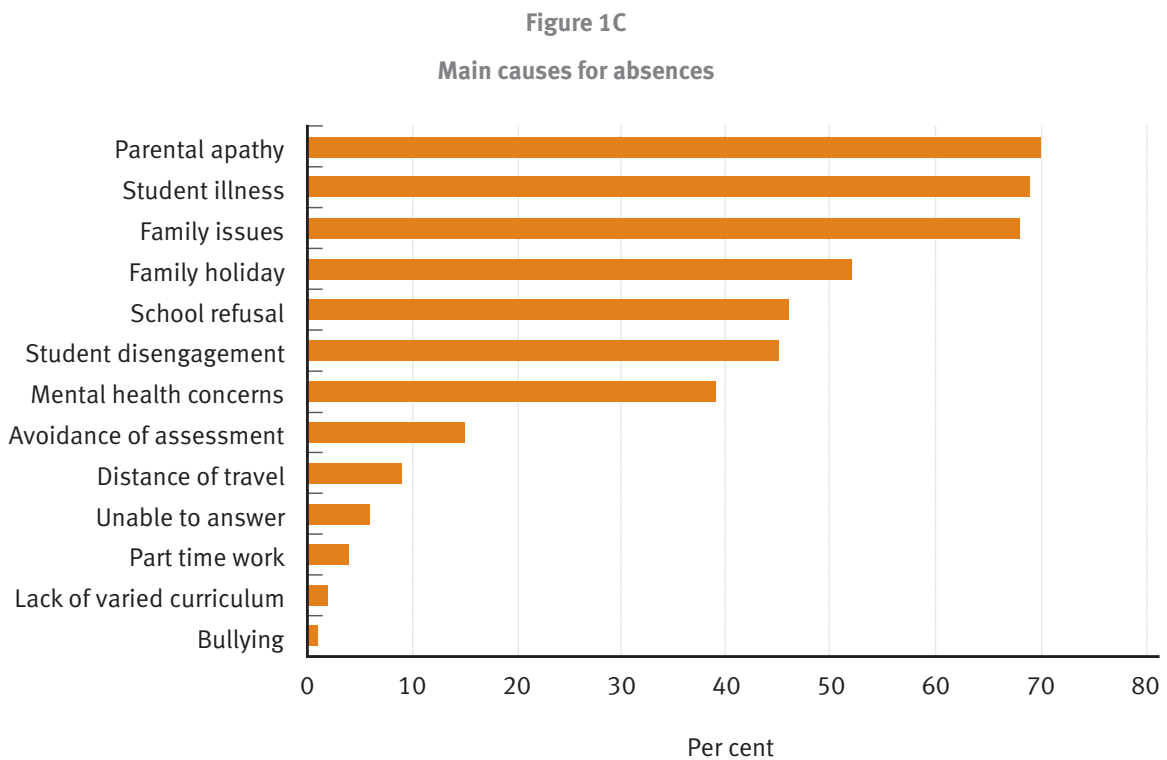
Per cent

Source: QAO

Impact of absenteeism

Department of Education and Training (DET) analysis of student attendance and performance data shows that students with less than 90 per cent attendance rates – that is, those who miss an average of one day or more a fortnight – have lower scores on national tests compared to students with higher attendance rates.

DET analysis also indicates that those students with unexplained or unauthorised absences are the most important to monitor. DET found that students with attendance rates of 85 per cent or less, due to unexplained reasons, are over:

- 4 times more likely to be suspended or excluded
- 1.5 times more likely to not finish Year 10
- 3.5 times more likely to not obtain an Overall Position (OP) 1-15.

Recognising and reporting child abuse and neglect

Going to school regularly has more than academic benefits. Teachers and principals also consider irregular attendance in identifying suspected signs of abuse and neglect. One of the warning signs of abuse or neglect is frequently being late or absent from school. These absences may or may not be explained by the parents. Being able to identify irregular attendance along with the other warning signs of abuse and neglect allows teachers and principals to be sure that children at risk are identified and receive the help they need.

1.2   Roles and responsibilities

Figure 1D summarises the roles of those responsible for managing and monitoring student attendance.

Figure 1D

Roles and responsibilities

Responsibility for student attendance	
1. Parents/caregivers	• Ensure their child attends school every day.
2. Department of Education and Training – central office	**Corporate Strategy and Performance** • Collate and analyse attendance data annually. • Produce and distribute regional and school student attendance data and reports. • Produce ad-hoc attendance reports on request. • Examine trends and relationships in departmental data. • Provide resources and advice for schools, regions and policy staff to assist them to understand data and improve performance. **Education Queensland** • Develop, review and update corporate policy and procedures for roll marking and managing student attendance. • Develop state-wide programs and initiatives. • Accountability for Indigenous policy and projects. • Examine trends and relationships in departmental data. • Provide resources and advice for schools, regions and policy staff to assist them to understand data and improve performance. **Assistant Regional Directors** • Review school performance – if attendance is considered an issue, discuss with the Principal as part of the strategic planning process.

Continued...

Responsibility for student attendance		
3.	Department of Education and Training – regional offices	**Principal Advisor Officers** • Provide guidance to schools regarding policy interpretation. **Principals** • Investigate and follow up student absences (includes issuing letters and /or notices to parents). • Monitor student attendance and patterns of non-attendance. • Develop and implement strategies to increase attendance and/or reduce truancy where appropriate. • Evaluate the effectiveness of strategies. • Collaborate with other agencies if necessary (e.g. Department of Communities or local police). • Refer parents and students for prosecution for continual non-attendance when all other strategies fail.
4.	Schools	**Teachers** • Record attendance and enter data in the school's student information database, including the reason given for any absences.
5.	Queensland Police Service	• Consider referrals from the Director-General of the Department of Education and Training to prosecute parents for failing to send their child to school.

Source: QAO

Parents/caregivers

Parents and primary caregivers are responsible for making sure their children attend school. Section 9 of the *Education (General Provision) Act 2006* (the Act) establishes compulsory schooling ages of 6.5 to 16 years (to the end of Year 10). After compulsory schooling age there is a further compulsory participation phase until children turn 17, or achieve a prescribed qualification. (During this phase parents are required to make sure their children participate either in school, training or employment).

Under Queensland law, parents must make sure their child of school age is enrolled and attends school all day, every school day, unless they have an acceptable reason. Illness, work experience or competing in a school sporting event are acceptable reasons for being absent from school.

Principals decide if the reason provided for a child's absence is acceptable. Unacceptable reasons are coded by schools as 'unauthorised' absences. Parents are advised to avoid keeping their child away from school for:

- birthdays
- shopping
- visiting family and friends
- if they sleep in
- looking after other children
- minor checkups or care such as hair cuts
- routine medical or other health appointments – they should be made either before or after school or during the school holidays.

Parents who do not have a reasonable excuse for a student's absence can be prosecuted under the *Education (General Provision) Act 2006*. The maximum fine is $600 for the first offence.

The Department of Education and Training

In April 2012, the department was restructured and renamed, the Department of Education, Training and Employment.

Departmental objectives, strategies and targets

Strategic planning

The department's *Strategic Plan 2009-13* included a strategy to increase student attendance rates to ensure all children are engaged in learning. This was amended in the Strategic Plan 2010-14 to implement strategies aimed at improving student attendance rates to ensure all children are engaged in learning.

The *Strategic Plan 2010-14* also included a strategy to *'Close the gap in educational outcomes for Indigenous students through a particular focus on achievement, attendance and retention'*. The key performance indicator was *'The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance'*.

The *Strategic Plan 2011-15* maintains the focus on attendance for Indigenous students but no longer includes a specific strategy to increase attendance rates of all students.

The department's current annual operational plan, which gives effect to its strategic plan, includes a target of increasing attendance rates for all students by 1 per cent, and to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student attendance by 2013.

Every Day Counts initiative

Commencing in 2008, this initiative consists of a promotional campaign and resources for schools. The promotional campaign distributed posters, brochures and postcards to schools, and a website was established with guidance, case studies and templates to assist schools to develop attendance strategies. No extra funding was provided to schools or regional offices to support implementation of this initiative.

Closing the Gap Education Strategy

Released in 2009, this strategy builds on the priority areas of the previous Partners for Success Indigenous education strategy, of attendance, retention, attainment and workforce capacity. The strategy includes targets to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance, performance and participation by 2013.

The strategy is supported by 16 state-wide initiatives, and in 2010-11, DET provided over $23.8 million in grants to support the implementation of the strategy.

Departmental policy and procedures

DET issues policies and procedures to guide schools on roll-marking, managing student absences and enforcing compulsory attendance.

During the audit, the two procedures for managing student absences and enforcing compulsory attendance were amended and combined into one procedure (Figure 1E).

While roll-marking procedures remained the same, the major changes effected from October 2011 were:

- additional monitoring requirements for three consecutive absences, 'unsatisfactory' attendance or 'persistent' unexplained absences
- a reduction in the number of warning letters and notices to parents
- the introduction of a requirement to implement strategies using departmental guidelines.

Figure 1E

DET procedures to guide schools

Procedure	Pre-October 2011	Current
Roll-marking in state schools	• Responsibilities for principals, roll markers and parents. • Requirement for rolls to be marked at least twice daily. • Requirement to follow up unexplained absences within three days. • Record-keeping requirements and communication protocols. • Links to templates and guidelines.	

Managing student absences	• Responsibilities for principals, teachers and parents.
	• Requirements for monitoring attendance and absenteeism.
	• Requirement to implement enforcement procedures for students absent more than **10 consecutive days** without a satisfactory reason.
	• Processes for negotiating flexible arrangements or altering a student's education program to promote engagement.
	• Links to guidelines and flowcharts.
		• Responsibilities for principals, teachers, parents and departmental staff.
		• Requirement to monitor absences and identify when a student:
		  – is absent for **three or more consecutive days**
		  – has a pattern of **persistent unexplained absences**
		  – attendance rate is **reasonably considered unsatisfactory.**
		• Requirement to implement strategies to manage absenteeism using:
		  – guidelines to address chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy
		  – *Every Day Counts* materials.
		• Process leading to recommendation for prosecution, including requirement for two **warning letters.**

Enforcement of compulsory schooling and compulsory participation phase	• Responsibilities for principals and other departmental staff. • Process leading to recommendation for prosecution, including requirement for **five warning letters.** • Links to flowcharts and templates.	

Source: QAO

Departmental guidance material to support schools

DET also provides a number of materials to assist schools improve attendance, including guidelines, templates, awareness-raising materials and case studies (see Figure 1F).

Figure 1F

Departmental guidance materials for schools

Material	Details
Guidelines to address chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy	Details types of absenteeism and possible responses, and sets out a five step process: • develop a school attendance policy • record and follow up student absences • monitor student non-attendance and patterns of attendance • develop a positive school culture • collaborate with other agencies.
Templates	• attendance Improvement Plan • attendance Policy • attendance Planning Tool • sample letter.
Every Day Counts awareness campaign	• fact sheet • brochures • posters and postcards.
Every Day Counts case studies	Five case studies of successful strategies implemented in schools.

Source: QAO

Departmental data analysis and reporting

DET provides schools with advice on suitable codes to record student absences. The absence codes used are:

• explained absences – holiday, illness, other

• disciplinary absences – suspension days, exclusion and cancellation

• unexplained and unauthorised absences.

In line with agreed national protocols, the department analyses attendance data for the first semester. The department's analysis of attendance for the first semester of 2010 found that absences are more likely in the week before school holidays (Figure 1G).

Figure 1G

Absences per week by reason, semester one, 2011
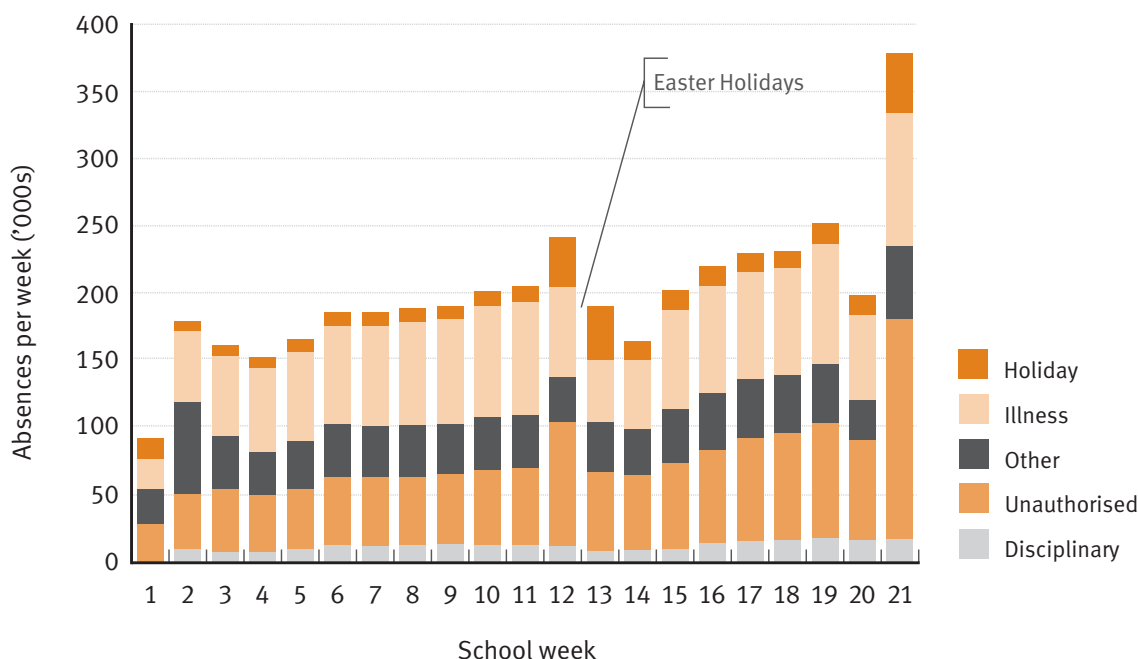
Source: Department of Education and Training

Schools

School principals are required by departmental policies and procedures to monitor and report on student attendance to parents and the local community in their annual reports. Individual school attendance rates are also published on the MySchool website.

Where a student's absence is unexplained, the school is required to follow up with the parents to obtain an explanation and discuss measures to improve attendance. If the principal cannot obtain an explanation, or attendance does not improve, a notice of failure to attend may be issued to the parents. From October 2011, after two notices of failure have been issued, the school is able to refer the case to the regional office for consideration. The Director-General may then recommend the case to the Queensland Police Service for prosecution of the parents or caregivers.

Local police may also assist schools to implement attendance improvement strategies and identify students in the locality who are not at school.

Schools are also able to use the services of, or refer students to, other agencies such as Child Safety Services, Department of Communities and other local, non-government organisations to support students and their families.

1.3   Structure of this report

Chapter 2 of this report examines student attendance data to determine whether the strategies and initiatives are achieving intended results.

Chapter 3 looks at the processes and strategies schools use to identify and manage absences.

Chapter 4 assesses the state-wide approach and how the department supports and measures improvements in student attendance.

2 | Student attendance data

Summary

Background

The Department of Education and Training (DET) has committed to improving student attendance rates by 1 per cent annually and to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance by 2013.

Conclusion

DET's approach has yet to improve state-wide attendance rates. Nor is it meeting projections to close the attendance gap for Indigenous students, and it is not evident that the 2013 target will be achieved.

Key findings

- Overall student attendance rates have remained steady over the last four years since the *Every Day Counts Initiative* was released.
- Attendance rates decrease significantly in Years 8, 9 and 10.
- For the last four years, attendance rates in:
  - primary schools are trending downwards
  - secondary schools are trending up.
- Student attendance rates for Indigenous students have not improved since the *Closing the Gap Education Strategy* was launched in 2009.
- In semester one of 2011, 31 per cent of students missed more than 10 per cent of school days.

2.1   Introduction

The department has set a state target to improve student attendance rates by 1 per cent annually and close the gap on Indigenous attendance by 2013. This chapter examines whether the department's strategies and initiatives are achieving intended results.

2.2   Conclusion

The data for 2007 to 2011 shows that the department has been unsuccessful in achieving its attendance growth targets for the student population as a whole, and for Indigenous students.

To this extent its strategies to promote attendance have been ineffective.

Significant progress is needed if the 2013 target to close the gap for Indigenous student attendance is to be reached.

2.3   Student attendance rates

State-wide

Attendance rates have declined slightly over the past five years, and have remained relatively stable since the introduction of the awareness raising initiative *Every Day Counts* in 2008 (Figure 2A). The impacts of cyclones, flooding and swine flu on state-wide attendance rates are unclear, as days when schools are closed are not included in calculations to determine the attendance rate.

Figure 2A

Attendance rates 2007-11 (Prep to Year 12)
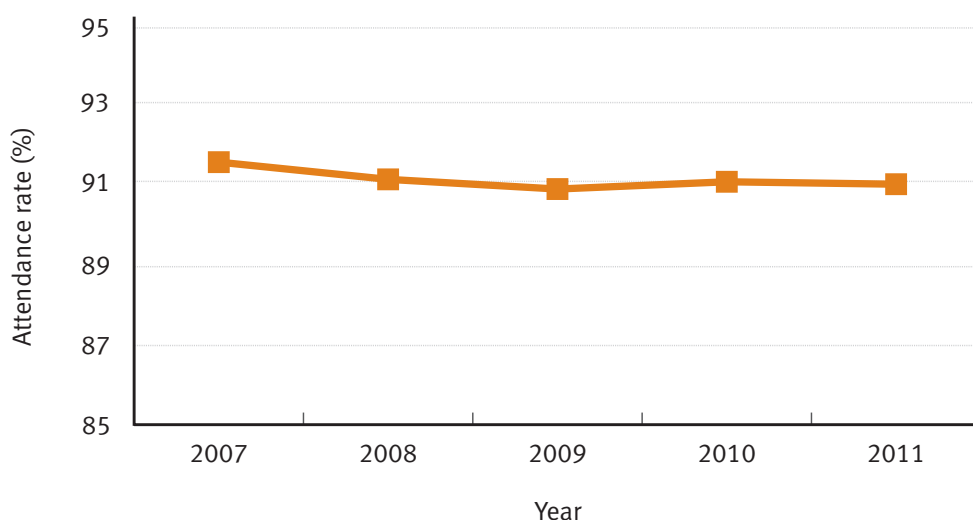
Source: QAO

Attendance rates by Year level

Attendance in semester one of 2011 for compulsory school years up to Year 10 shows that attendance rates start to decline from Year 8, and by Year 10 are 5 per cent below the current overall average rate of 91 per cent (Figure 2B).

Figure 2B

Attendance rates by Year level, 2011
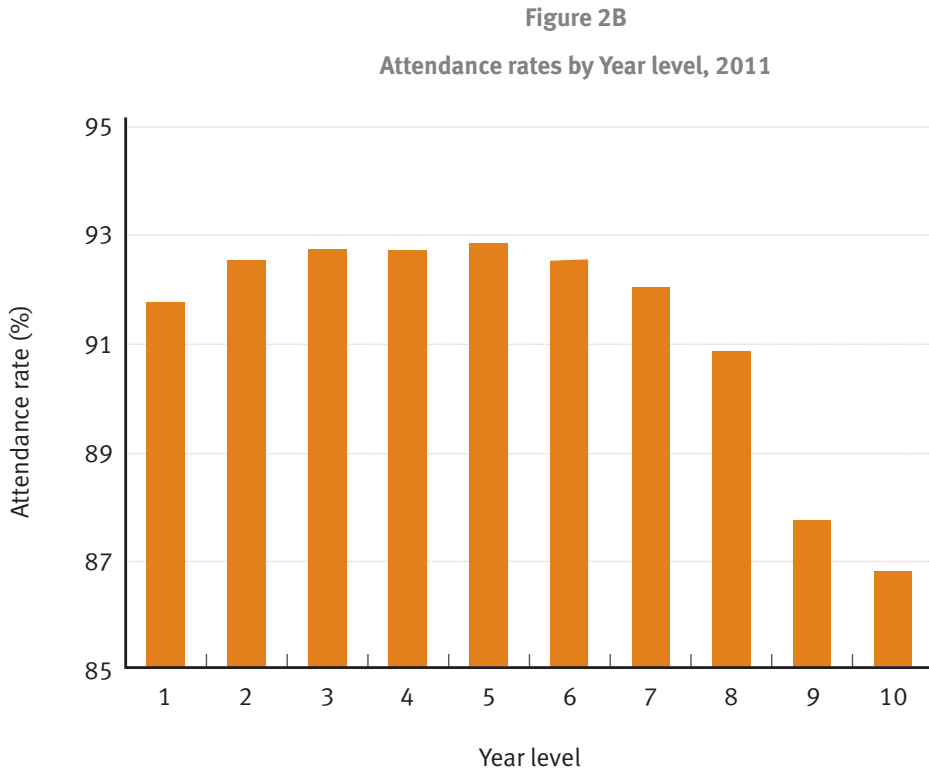
Source: QAO

While the attendance rates in the secondary school years remain comparatively lower than for the primary school years, there has been a slight improvement in the secondary attendance rates over the last four years (Figure 2C).

Figure 2C

Attendance rates for Years 8-10, 2008-11
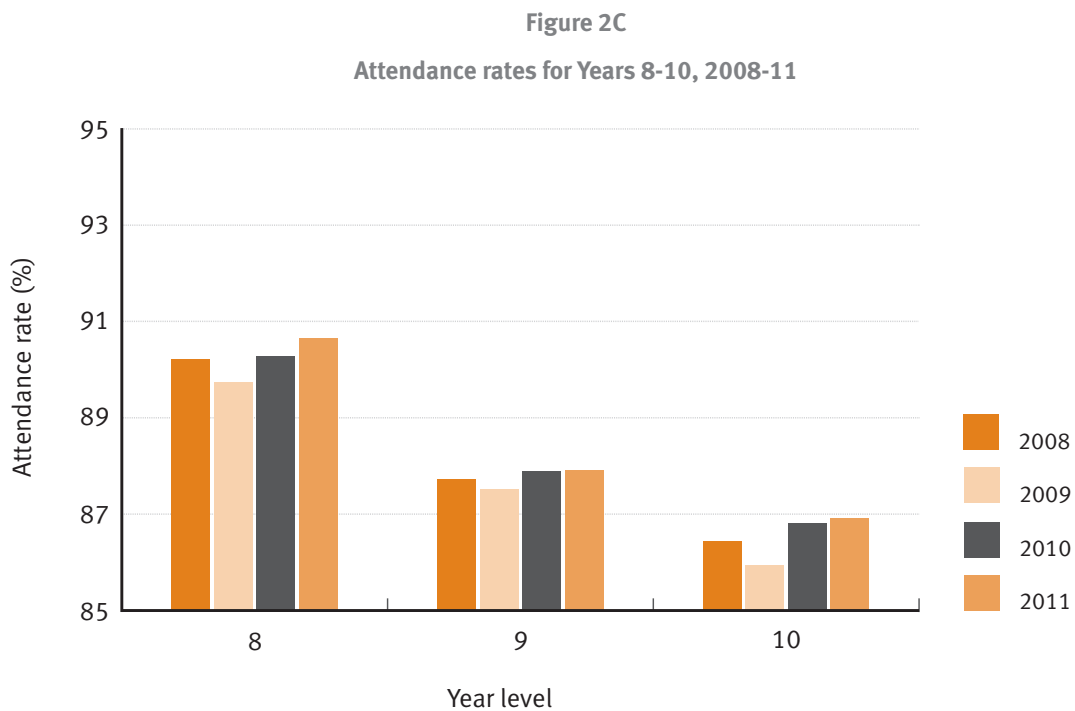
Source: QAO

By contrast, there has been a slight decrease in attendance rates for most of the primary years, as shown in Figure 2D.

Figure 2D

Attendance rates for Years 1-7, 2008-11
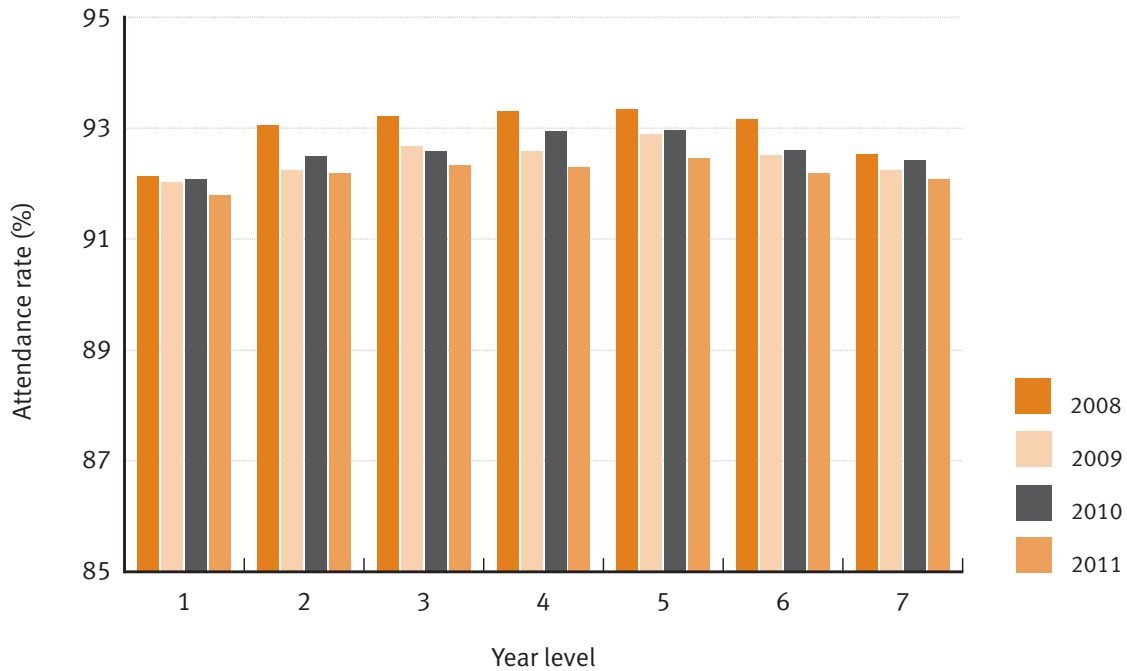
Source: QAO

Figure 2E details a comparison of attendance rates across all states. It shows that the pattern of declining attendance from Year 8 is a national phenomenon. It also shows, however, that New South Wales and Victoria attendance rates are consistently higher than Queensland. It is noted that Year 7 is in secondary school in most other states.

Figure 2E

Australian government schools – State attendance rates, 2009
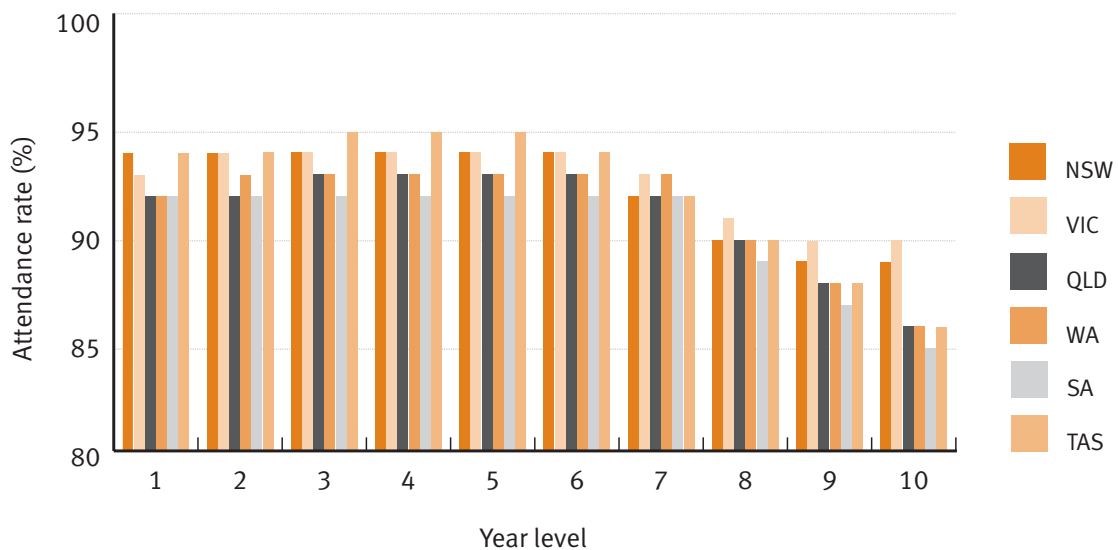
Source: Productivity Commission

Chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy

Departmental guidelines acknowledge that absenteeism is complex and covers a range of behaviours, including chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy. Chronic absenteeism can be persistent or habitual lateness, and the department advises schools that it is 'variously defined' as being absent for 10 per cent or more of school days.

In 2011, 32.5 per cent of students attended school less than 90 per cent of the time. Figure 2F shows that the proportion of students with attendance of less than 90 per cent significantly increases in secondary school, with almost half of Year 10 students missing more than 10 per cent of the school year.

Figure 2F

Attendance below 90 per cent by Year level

Number of students with attendance below 90%
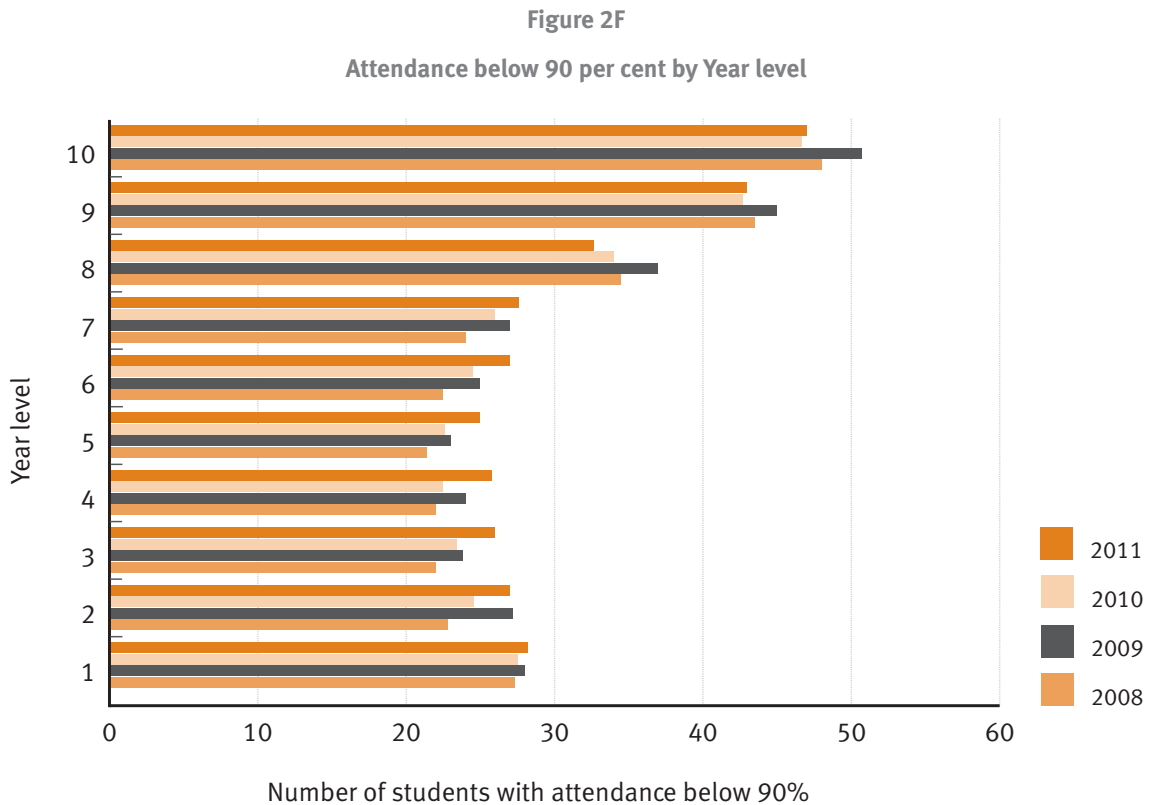
Source: QAO

Indigenous attendance

Indigenous student attendance patterns have mirrored the trend in overall patterns of attendance, and the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates has remained relatively unchanged over the past five years, at around 7 per cent (Figure 2G).

Figure 2G

Attendance rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Years Prep to 12)
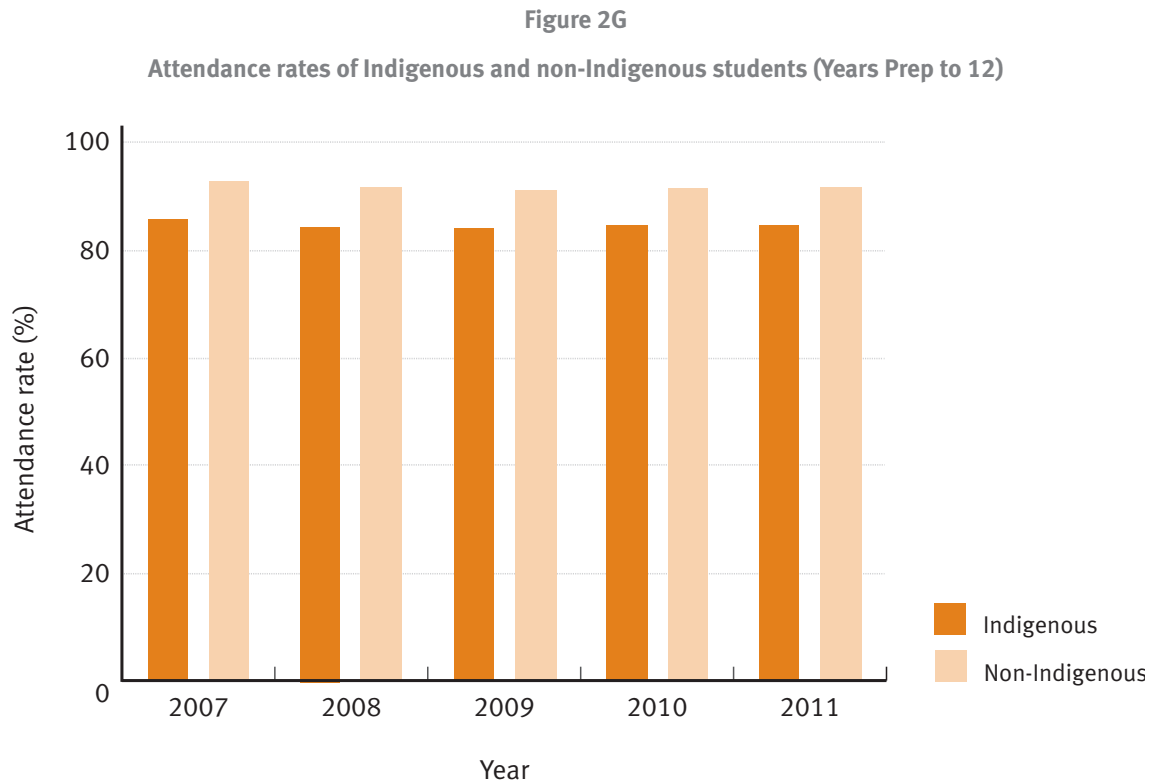
Source: QAO

Since the release of the *Closing the Gap Education Strategy* in 2008, there has been no discernible improvement in closing the gap between attendance rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The gap was 7 per cent in 2011, which compares unfavourably to the projection of 4.7 per cent by this time (Figure 2H).

Figure 2H

Progress against closing the gap in Indigenous attendance
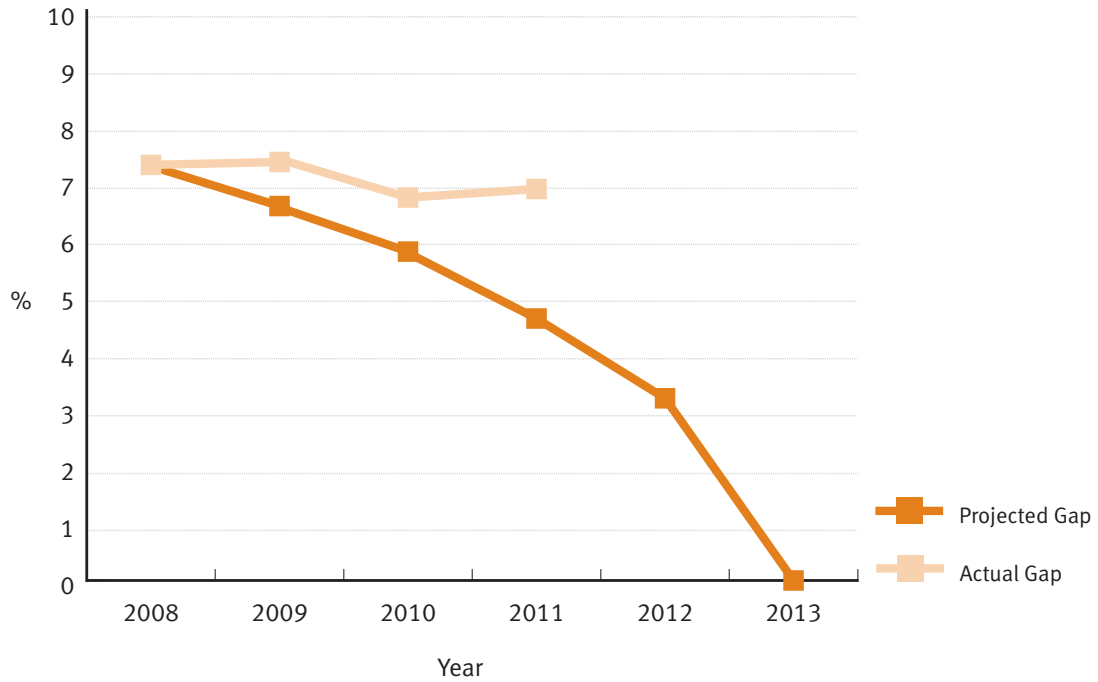
Source: QAO

Given the rate of progress achieved to date, it is not evident that the 2013 target will be met under the current strategy and approaches.

3 | School strategies

Summary

Background

Schools negotiate targets for attendance rates as part of the annual planning process but are expected to increase attendance rates by at least 1 per cent each year. Schools need to identify students with unsatisfactory attendance at risk of disengaging from school, and work with them and their parents to improve their attendance and academic outcomes.

Conclusion

Students with chronic absenteeism, school refusal and/or truancy are not being consistently identified, as departmental policy has not set a clear definition of 'unsatisfactory' attendance, and electronic systems do not currently provide the reporting functionality needed to identify and monitor it.

Without clear guidance and suitable tools for analysis, schools are less able to consistently administer the requirements of the Act and identify these students.

Key findings

- Schools are not monitoring student attendance consistently. Departmental procedures require schools to monitor 'unsatisfactory attendance' but it is not clearly defined, so schools focused primarily on consecutive and unexplained absences.
- Schools have to follow up all unexplained absences, but in 2011 a third of the student absences in semester one remained unexplained by parents.
- Not all students with chronic absenteeism, school refusal and/or truancy were being identified and managed by schools.

Key recommendations

It is recommended that the Department of Education, Training and Employment:

- revise its guidance, procedures and systems to include a clear definition of unsatisfactory attendance and a consistent approach for schools to manage and track actions to follow up unexplained absences
- increase the range of OneSchool reports for schools to manage attendance
- provide schools with access to a range of materials and evidence-based strategies to increase attendance and case manage chronically absent students
- assess how effective the process to enforce the Act is in increasing attendance.

3.1   Introduction

To increase attendance rates, schools need to have processes in place to identify and manage students whose attendance pattern puts them at educational risk. This chapter examines whether:

- absences are followed up and parents' obligations are enforced
- schools identify students whose attendance requires management and/or their parents should be prosecuted
- schools implement strategies to increase attendance.

3.2   Conclusion

All schools are required to follow up unexplained and consecutive absences; however, a third of absences remained unexplained at the end of semester one 2011. Getting explanations for absences is necessary so that students who may be at educational risk due to their attendance can be identified. This requires tools and skills to be able to analyse trends and patterns of all absence reasons, not just unexplained absences.

Strategies and processes to identify chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy are inconsistent and the management of students by schools with 'unsatisfactory' attendance is not effective. There were 36 000 students who missed 20 or more days of school during semester one.

When parents are unable or unwilling to ensure their child attends school regularly there are few options and resources available to schools. Principals report that the letters sent to parents to reinforce their legal obligations are not effective in increasing attendance. Where schools visited had implemented local strategies such as reward programs, targets and awareness-raising, they had the benefit of being able to access external assistance or funding to resource these programs.

The department does not know if the current process to enforce parents' obligations to send their children to school every day is effective in increasing attendance. It does not keep data on how many:

- students are identified as having 'unsatisfactory' attendance
- parents are referred to regional office for prosecution
- parents are charged and prosecuted.

3.3   Recording and monitoring absences

All principals responded in the survey that monitoring attendance was important. More secondary principals placed greater importance on this than primary principals. Both primary and secondary principals were generally satisfied with the clarity of the department's procedures to manage student attendance.

There are two electronic student information systems currently in place to help record, follow up and report student attendance – School Management System (SMS) and OneSchool. Approximately half of the schools across the state are using SMS and the other half OneSchool. The class roll and absence data entered into these systems is used to generate performance reports and determine attendance rates. There were no major differences in the principals' responses to the survey for schools using SMS compared to schools using OneSchool.

The department provides training to schools to use the OneSchool system. There are online training (series of webinars available in the application and on OneChannel), guides, materials and reports. The audit survey results showed that only 49 per cent of respondents believed that the SMS/OneSchool helpdesk provides useful advice on how to record student attendance.

Some schools had purchased an electronic third party tool to assist with monitoring student absences. Third party tools are an add-on to the existing system that have additional functions such as sending out text messages to notify parents that their child is absent from school that day, requesting a reason be provided to the school. Almost 30 per cent of schools that responded to the audit survey advised they are using a third party tool. Of those, 76 per cent are secondary schools.

Schools indicated the main benefits of third party tools were:

- electronic roll marking
- efficient follow up and communication with parents (e.g. text messaging)
- tracking, monitoring and reporting attendance trends and patterns.

The department intends that all schools will be transitioned to OneSchool by April 2012. Initially OneSchool will give all schools the ability to mark rolls electronically and enhanced reporting, but not the functionality to follow up with parents by text message.

The department has developed new reporting capabilities in the OneSchool system that will allow all principals and regional staff to access more easily a broad range of reports on student attendance. The dashboard reports include benchmarks and colour coding to allow easy analysis of student attendance information. The OneSchool dashboard is currently in testing and will be deployed in 2012.

3.4   Following up absences

Schools are required to establish processes for following up unexplained absences with parents as soon as practicable, but within three days of any unexplained absence. This allows the school to update the codes in the system and decide if the absences are authorised or unauthorised. When absences remain unexplained, schools are unable to determine the underlying causes and identify if the absence was for a legitimate holiday or illness, or is an indicator of chronic absence, school refusal or truancy. Figure 3A shows that one-third of the absences in semester one 2011 remained unexplained by parents.

Figure 3A

Absences by reason, 2011
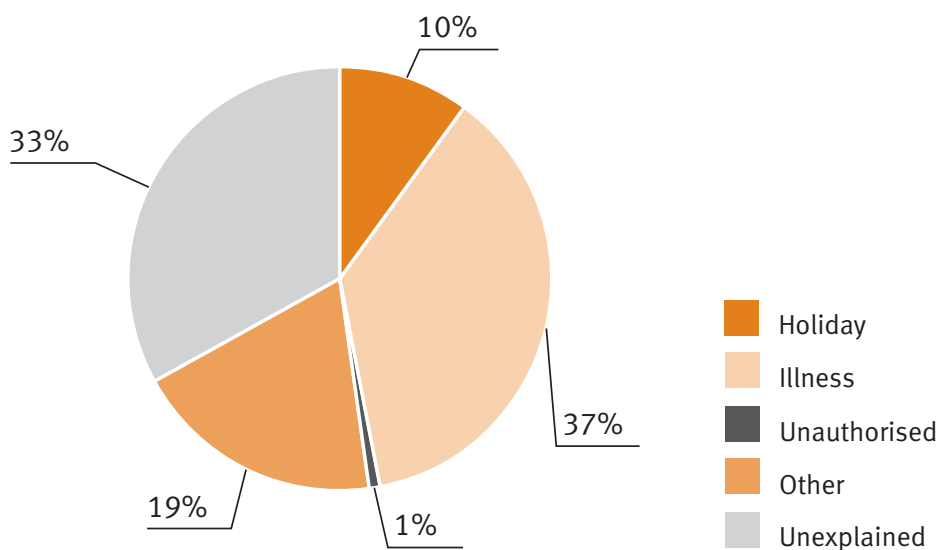
Source: QAO

All of the eight state schools visited by audit had processes in place to follow up unexplained absences, but follow up processes for obtaining an explanation for absences differed between schools. Some schools had logged all attempts to contact the parents straight into their student information system, while one school did not keep a complete record of phone calls and/or letters made to parents.

One school had set up case files to aid the monitoring process for all students with poor attendance, and a detailed log is maintained. This allows the school to meet the evidentiary requirements needed to successfully prosecute parents should the school decide to recommend prosecution.

Principals were not satisfied that threats of legal action to parents were successful, as only 36 per cent of principals either agreed or strongly agreed that letters advising parents of their legal obligations are effective in improving attendance.

3.5   Identifying unsatisfactory attendance

The procedure on managing absences requires students with 'unsatisfactory' attendance, or three consecutive absences, to be identified. The policy does not include a clear definition of 'unsatisfactory' attendance , or set a minimum standard for attendance to ensure the procedure is applied consistently across the state. It is left to the principals' discretion to determine if a student's attendance requires management and if the parents have failed to meet their obligations.

The lack of a consistent minimum attendance standard across the state was identified as an issue in the recent evaluation of the federally funded *School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure* (SEAM) program. In the Northern Territory, where a minimum standard of five unauthorised absences in a 10 week period is set, 25 per cent of students were referred for support under SEAM. In contrast, only 2 per cent of Queensland students were referred during the same period. The report suggests this difference is due to a lack of consistent triggers for action in Queensland. The report also acknowledges that in Queensland when students were reported to Centrelink because of attendance issues, attendance improved by 55 per cent compared to 11 per cent in the Northern Territory.

Attendance thresholds and targets for individual students were set at some schools visited. These are set out in Figure 3B.

Figure 3B

Attendance thresholds and targets in schools

School	Threshold / Target	Action
Cairns West State School	Over 95% attendance	Student rewarded in assembly
Mabel Park State School	100% attendance	Student receives a letter home (at the end of term) and an invitation to a celebration morning tea
	Between 75% and 90% attendance	Teacher to follow up reason for absence
	Under 75% attendance	Student referred to welfare officer
Mabel Park State High School	Over 95% attendance	Student receives 'positive attendance' letter and may access extra privilege reward activities
	Between 80% and 90% attendance	Continue to monitor student's attendance
	Under 80% attendance	Deputy Principal to investigate and refer student for case management where needed

Source: QAO

Case study 3A illustrates the triggers used to monitor student attendance at Mabel Park State High School.

Case study 3A

Managing attendance at Mabel Park State High School

Mable Park State High School has developed additional guidance and processes to monitor and manage attendance and absenteeism. This includes:

- focus on all absences, including:
  - unexplained absences
  - part day absences
  - satisfactory and unsatisfactory absence reasons
  - attendance rate per student.
- clear triggers for action
  - different processes and forms for part day and full day unexplained absences
  - recognition for students with attendance over 95%
  - investigation of individual students with attendance below 80 per cent.
- clear accountability
  - Deputy principals are responsible for following up on students who are late or have unexplained absences
  - Administration Officers are responsible for checking rolls and providing reports.
- engagement with all students:
  - students are required to complete a mathematical formula every five weeks to calculate their own attendance average for the previous month
  - positive acknowledgement for students with attendance over 95 per cent.
- regular reporting:
  - a weekly Absence Report to review unexplained absences
  - a four-weekly Days Absent Report to review total days absent
  - a five-weekly Attendance Passport signed by parents.

Attendance at Mabel Park State High School has increased significantly since 2008, with an increase of over 11 per cent between 2009 and 2010.

Five of the eight schools audited focused their identification primarily on unexplained consecutive absences, rather than considering whether the student's overall attendance was satisfactory or not. They did not run regular reports to identify students with unacceptable attendance. Schools are required to have attendance management practices to minimise absences by identifying absences quickly, following up promptly and sending clear messages to students and parents that attendance is vital. However, there is a lack of clear advice to help schools identify students with patterns of unsatisfactory attendance or when to inform parents.

All eight principals were able to quickly access attendance records from OneSchool for an individual student to identify trends and patterns of unsatisfactory attendance. When asked to generate an absence report for a whole Year level or the whole school, staff at three of the schools were not familiar with the range of reports available to identify trends and patterns of absences. Four schools had not identified all students with chronic absenteeism and in one case a student who attended less than 45 per cent of the year (by October) had not been identified and case managed by the school.

3.6 Improving attendance

Figure 3C shows that most schools are relying on reactive, follow up processes rather than proactive strategies designed to address the causes of absenteeism.

Figure 3C

Strategies and processes to improve attendance
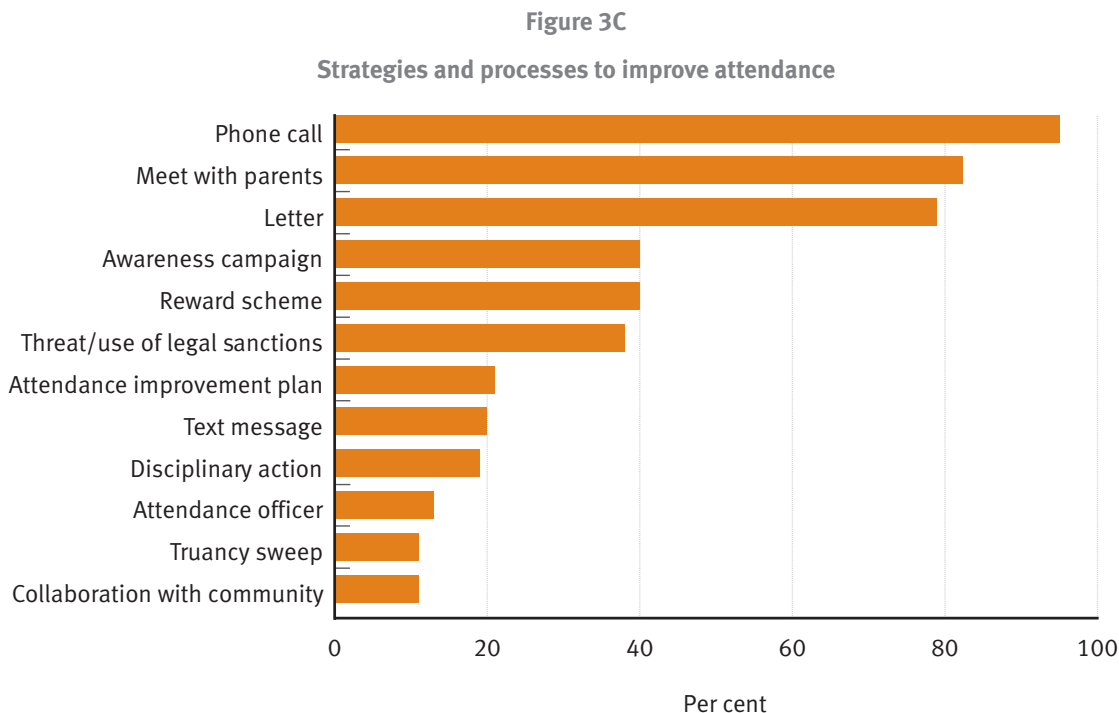
Source: QAO

Schools visited with average or above average attendance rates had follow-up processes for unexplained absences but did not have formal proactive approaches to address the causes of chronic absenteeism.

The schools visited with low attendance rates had invested significant resources into proactive strategies that directly identified and targeted students with poor attendance. These schools had access to Commonwealth funded programs to assist them to develop and deliver strategies to improve student attendance, and one of these strategies is outlined in case study 3B.

Case study 3B

Cairns West State School – Academic Success Guarantee
Cairns West State School has implemented the Academic Success Guarantee program to improve student attendance. The program was informed by data analysis undertaken by the school, which showed that the highest improving students among those receiving 'catch up' assistance were students who had an 80-90 per cent attendance rate. The school believed that this was because these students attended enough of the time to get consistency of teaching, but were absent enough to require individual attention.
The program involves a service agreement between the school and parents. The school provides a commitment to work with students to reach academic benchmarks in a 'whatever it takes' culture for students who attend at least 95 per cent of the time. The agreement is signed between the school and interested parents. The key messages the program seeks to communicate are:

- for parents: If you want your child to be successful, send them to school.
- for teaching staff (teachers and teacher aides): If kids come to school then we must do whatever it takes to ensure success.
- for administration staff: Supporting teachers, parents and kids by doing whatever it takes to ensure success.

The school has reported that in the first year of the program's implementation, the school saw a 700 per cent increase in Year 1 students achieving benchmarks. Overall, in the first two years of implementation, the program has seen an increase in benchmark achievement across the school rise from 32 per cent of students to 53 per cent of students.

3.7 Enforcing parents' obligations

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.

The 2006 amendments to the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* introduced two changes relevant to student attendance. The maximum penalty available for a truancy offence was doubled to 12 penalty units and $1 200. The period of compulsory involvement in education was also changed. Before the changes, a Queensland child could leave school upon turning 15. The current position is that a child must be participating in school, training or employment until they turn 17 or achieve a prescribed qualification.

Figure 3D outlines the process for principals to enforce compulsory school attendance.

Figure 3D

Enforcing compulsory attendance

Steps to enforce compulsory attendance in Queensland schools
1. Identify unexplained or unsatisfactory absences or patterns of absence.
2. Confirm that the child should be attending school.
3. Contact both parents to check if there is a reasonable excuse for the absences.
4. Offer support to ensure attendance improves.
5. Consider whether an exemption from schooling is appropriate.
6. If after 15 school days since parents were first contacted, send **Failure to attend letter (s.178(2))** to request a meeting.
7. If the meeting occurred but after five more school days attendance does not improve, send **Warning Notice Failure to attend (s178(4)).**
8. If parents do not attend meeting and attendance has not improved after five school days, send **Warning Notice Failure to attend (s178(4)).**
9. If attendance has not improved after another five school days, investigation commences to determine if the child had enrolled at another school, Distance Education or Home Schooling.
10. Advise Regional Office if they wish to seek the Director-General's consent to prosecute.
11. Regional Office determines whether to forward the request to the Director-General.

Source: QAO

Principals reported that contacting parents and sending letters often had an initial impact in increasing attendance, but this diminished after the third or fourth time. Starting the process from the beginning each time made it difficult for schools as parents became more reluctant to attend meetings to discuss attendance issues.

In 2011, there were 115 000 students who missed 10 days or more schooling. Of these students, 36 000 missed 20 days or more in semester one. The data does not show how many of these students had missed school due to truancy, school refusal or failure of parents to ensure their children attend school every day.

In 2011, two persons were charged with failing to ensure their child attended school every day. The department records how many recommendations are made by regional office to central office to prosecute parents for non-attendance but not how many recommendations principals make to regional office. The department does not know the effectiveness of this legal process. Figure 3E summarises the total prosecutions made from January 2009 to December 2011.

Figure 3E

Number of persons charged and charges preferred

Year	Persons referred by DET to QPS	Persons charged	Charges preferred
2009	6	9	12
2010	6	4	4
2011	3	2	2
Total	15	15	18

Source: Charges – Queensland Police Service; and Referrals – Department of Education and Training

Case study 3C outlines the impact of changes to the New South Wales *Education Act 1990 No.8* for enforcing parents' legal obligations.

Case study 3C

Enforcing compulsory attendance in New South Wales
Where schools in New South Wales have used a range of strategies to resolve a non-attendance issue without success, a referral may be made to the regional *Home School Liaison Program* for support. The *Home School Liaison Program* provides a supportive service to students, parents and schools to encourage the attendance of students at school.

The home school liaison officer (136 in 2010) develops an attendance improvement plan with the school, student and parents, which identifies strategies and responsibilities to improve the student's attendance.

Where an attendance improvement plan has been unsuccessful in resolving the matter, and the parents have not meaningfully engaged with the plan, the matter is referred for consideration of legal action.

Before 2010, the only legal option available if all other measures had failed to resolve the matter was prosecution in the Local Court. With the introduction of new legislation in 2010, other options are now available such as confidential conferences and seeking a Compulsory Schooling Order in the Children's Court.

In 2010, 310 cases were referred for compulsory attendance enforcement action. The number of cases in 2010 was significantly lower than in 2009 (695) because of the introduction of the new legislation, which gives more options to parents before court action. |

3.8   Recommendations

It is recommended that the Department of Education, Training and Employment:

1. **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.**

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

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

4. **assess how effective the process to enforce the Act is in increasing attendance.**

4 | Departmental strategies

Summary

Background

Given the direct correlation between student attendance and academic performance, the department needs to analyse the trends and patterns of attendance and monitor schools to determine if they are implementing strategies as intended to improve attendance.

Conclusion

There is no state-wide strategy or program with actions, timeframes, budgets, responsibilities and evaluation, to improve student attendance.

Focusing on increasing attendance rates at schools or areas where attendance rates are below average, rather than on every student with unsatisfactory attendance, means that some students with chronic absenteeism are not being identified and managed.

External stakeholders are unable to assess the department's performance in this area of student engagement.

Key findings

- The department has established a policy and procedure framework supported by awareness raising materials and case studies for schools to use.
- The regional and school reports on student attendance have resulted in regional staff working with schools with attendance rates below the state average to develop strategies.
- The key measure for monitoring attendance, the school attendance rate, does not report the extent of chronic absenteeism.
- Schools report attendance rates in their annual reports but the department's annual report does not include state-wide attendance performance measures.
- There is no current data dictionary and changes made to the attendance data are not logged or verified with schools.

Key recommendations

It is recommended that the Department of Education, Training and Employment:

- revise performance measures to include a focus on chronically absent students and publicly report progress against all student attendance performance measures
- improve the quality of the student attendance data by updating the data dictionary and quality assurance processes.

4.1   Introduction

To improve attendance, the department needs a state-wide strategy in place that is informed by relevant research and analysis of reliable data.

This chapter examines whether the department's and schools' strategies, performance measures and reports address student attendance and absenteeism.

4.2   Conclusion

The department has established a policy and procedure framework supported by awareness raising materials and case studies for schools to use. However, there is no state-wide plan to give effect to the department's target to increase attendance rates by 1 per cent. There is a strategy for Indigenous students to close the gap by 2013, which is supported with resources through the National Partnership Agreement.

The current focus by regional offices is on schools with below average attendance rates, but a significant number of students enrolled in schools with average or above average attendance also have 'unsatisfactory' attendance patterns, and are not being identified.

The links between student attendance and achievement are well established. A greater effort is needed to ensure that all students at all schools with 'unsatisfactory' attendance are identified consistently across the state. Identifying and supporting these students early will have long term benefits for their educational outcomes and for the community.

Incomplete public reporting means that parents and the community are not able to assess progress on this key measure of student engagement.

4.3   State-wide approaches

At the state-wide level, action to improve student attendance rates has been informed by the *Every Day Counts* initiative and regional monitoring of schools' performance. Improving Indigenous attendance is supported by the state-wide *Closing the Gap Education Strategy* and additional monitoring and reporting processes.

Schools are encouraged to implement appropriate local strategies that address specific types of absenteeism.

Evidence base for strategies

Every year, semester one attendance data analysis and trends are reported to the Director-General and Minister. This analysis informed the development of *Every Day Counts*.

In 2011, the department conducted research into the link between attendance and student achievement in national tests. The results of this research were presented at relevant conferences, and will be disseminated to schools in 2012. This work examined patterns in attendance data, national and international research literature and initiatives, and strategies schools are using to increase attendance. This resulted in a report and a series of case studies, which were in draft at the time of audit. The draft report identifies a number of important trends and areas where focus could be beneficial.

Strategies and initiatives

DET's approach relies on schools achieving local attendance targets using local strategies, initiatives and community resources. The department has established attendance policies, procedures, guidelines and awareness raising materials to support schools.

There is no state-wide strategy or supporting plan with clear actions, timeframes, budget or assignment of responsibilities to give effect to the department's objective of improving student attendance rates by 1 per cent annually.

The *Every Day Counts* initiative is primarily a support package for schools. The implementation and outcomes from this initiative have not been monitored or assessed by the department, and it is not clear how this can be achieved as there are no expected outcomes, performance measures or targets.

Principals surveyed identified that in only 40 per cent of schools, awareness campaigns were being used to improve attendance.

In addition, 47 per cent of principals did not agree that support provided is sufficient to manage persistent non-attendance. While 81 per cent of principals believed the strategies they were using were assisting to improve attendance, 74 per cent reported they would welcome further guidance from the department on developing strategies to increase attendance.

For Indigenous students, the *Closing the Gap Education Strategy* is supported by 16 state-wide initiatives, and in 2010-11, DET provided over $23.8 million in grants to support its implementation. The strategy sets tailored, regional targets, and regions are required to negotiate with relevant schools to implement documented, evidence-based, localised initiatives to achieve strategy objectives.

The effectiveness of this strategy is evaluated annually, with the outcomes for schools, regions and central office reported in an annual Report Card. The Report Cards for 2009 and 2010, finalised in December 2011, report on progress against the targets and outline key strategies underway. The report includes data on progress toward the attendance target, but provides no assessment of the effectiveness of the individual strategies being used to improve attendance. Schools developing their own strategies to improve attendance cannot use the report to identify successful approaches to replicate.

4.4   Regional approaches

Regional offices are responsible for monitoring the performance of schools and for helping them to improve. Regions support schools in various ways. Each region provides a different mix of support. This support could include:

- regular meetings with principals
- facilitating cluster strategies to increase attendance
- providing shared resources.

At all of the regions visited, the Regional Directors and Assistant Regional Directors provided support to make sure that schools with below average attendance rates had strategies in place to increase their attendance rates.

Three of the five regions visited provided significant support to these schools, including developing collaborative strategies, such as the Beenleigh Together Against Truancy program outlined in case study 4A.

Case study 4A

Beenleigh Together Against Truancy (BTAT) program

Commencing in 2009, the BTAT program aims to deter students from truanting and reduce the incidence of crime committed by youth in the area. It involves the Beenleigh Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC), Beenleigh Police, five high schools and eight primary schools in the South East Queensland region, Beenleigh Yatala Chamber of Commerce and local business.

The program involved:

- implementing a student ID card system in schools involved in the program – this allows the school to generate a photo leave pass for those students who are granted permission to be exempt from class/school

- regional funding for a full time truancy officer to patrol the hot spots in the local area for students that should be at school – the truancy officer asks students to produce their leave pass, if they do not have one the student is reported to their school and parents

- the engagement of 140 local businesses to implement a policy to refuse service to students without a BTAT accredited photo leave pass during school hours – they display a large sticker to this effect at the store entrance.

Any further action that needs to be taken is the responsibility of the relevant school.

In semester one of 2009 there was an average of 14 truants a week from one school. In the following year it was reported that there was an average of 5.7 truants per week from two schools.

In the later part of 2010 and 2011 the BTAT program evolved and entered a new partnership with Education Queensland. All shops have also had stickers updated to ensure they are all still committed to the project. Education Queensland is currently funding the BTAT program under it's 'Every Child Counts' program which will cease in 2012.

BTAT won a National Crime Award in 2009.

Monitoring school performance

Reports on school attendance data are provided to schools and regional offices. The reports include semester one attendance data for each year level for each school annually, benchmarked against state rates. They also include the number of students in the school with an attendance rate below 85 per cent at the end of semester one; however, this data is not benchmarked and therefore cannot be used for assessing performance.

The data, based on semester one attendance, is provided to regions and schools in September each year, but in 2011 it was not provided until December as the data was being merged from two systems.

Regional offices use school attendance reports to focus their attention on schools with attendance rates below the state average. However, audit analysis indicates that of the 34 000 students who attended less than 80 per cent of the time in 2011, 15 000 or 44 per cent were at schools with average or above average attendance rates. The use of the school attendance rate to monitor school performance has the potential to mask the issue of chronic absenteeism.

Regional staff expressed concern that the data in attendance reports are only updated annually, and are therefore out of date and of limited use for monitoring during the year. Principals have access to school databases that can run reports on school attendance as needed. To obtain more frequent reports on student attendance, regional staff can request ad-hoc reports from schools.

Sixty-six per cent of principals surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that information in the attendance reports provided centrally is useful; however, more than 50 per cent indicated that there is a lack of support to monitor and report on student attendance.

The department is continuing to develop a range of school attendance data and reports and has advised that a handbook is being drafted to give staff greater guidance on how to interpret the attendance data. The department is also developing a dashboard (to be deployed in first half of 2012), which could give regional staff access to more frequent reports on student attendance.

Additional monitoring of Indigenous attendance

Progress against targets on Indigenous attendance is monitored through quarterly reports provided to schools with high Indigenous populations. These reports show:

- five year comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates compared to the state attendance rate for all students
- comparison between the proportion of Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students with an attendance rate of less than 80 per cent. However, this information does not include trends over time and is not benchmarked, so it is not used by regional staff for monitoring school performance, or identifying where intervention may be required.

Evaluating school strategies

Evaluation of school strategies rests with the school and the region. Schools are required to review their effectiveness every three or four years as part of their own strategic review processes.

Eighty per cent of principals surveyed indicated they regularly evaluate their strategies to improve attendance, with 81 per cent believing that their strategies were helping them achieve their attendance targets. At the eight schools visited there was no documented evidence to substantiate this. The only examples provided of evaluation reports were for Commonwealth-funded programs such as *Let's Stay Put* and the *Student Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure program*.

In 2011, the department conducted an evaluation of the effect of 10 local initiatives on student attendance rates from 2009 to 2010. The case studies are available on the department's website.

4.5   Accountability

Performance measures

The department uses the following performance measures:

- **Student attendance rate** – the average attendance for a given group of students. An attendance rate of 100 per cent would mean that every child attended school every day.
- **Closing the gap target** – a target to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates by 2013.

Public reports

The department's Annual Report 2010-11 outlines the key approaches to improving attendance of *Every Day Counts* and *Closing the Gap*. The Annual Report 2010-11 and *Service Delivery Statement 2010-11* report quantitatively on the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates, but do not provide the overall attendance rate or information on the proportion of students who are chronically absent. External stakeholders are not able to determine if progress is being made to improve student attendance rates and what impact this may be having on student achievement across the state.

Since 2008, schools have been required to publish their attendance rates in a school annual report. These reports contain the attendance rate for the whole school and attendance rates by year level. They do not report on the proportion of chronically absent students.

Data for reporting

The department acknowledges that attendance rate calculations and analysis is dependent on the entry of accurate attendance data by schools. It believes that the accuracy of entries has been improving since data collection commenced in 2006 due to the increased focus on attendance.

Centrally, reporting is undertaken by trained staff using ad-hoc queries. Data used for departmental reporting is extracted from source systems to a separate database and manually cleansed and verified. Schools are advised of changes made in this database, but there is no verification process to ensure the data is updated in the source systems. Additionally, the reporting database is unable to log changes made, so any errors cannot be identified as there is no audit trail.

If a student attended multiple schools during semester one, the student's attendance is only reported for the last school that the student attended. In addition, if a student record was not active at the date of reporting, it is not counted for reporting purposes. This is different to the way other jurisdictions treat attendance data and may give an incomplete assessment of student attendance.

The department has a data dictionary to ensure consistency of data definition. However, at the time of audit, it was focused only on *Service Delivery Statement* measures and did not include attendance measures. A data dictionary capturing all measures in use, including attendance measures, was in draft form at the time of audit.

4.6   Recommendations

It is recommended that the Department of Education, Training and Employment:

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

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.**

Appendices

Appendix A |

Auditor-General Act 2009 (Section 64) – Submissions and comments received

Introduction

In accordance with section 64 of the *Auditor-General Act 2009* a copy of this report was provided to the Department of Education and Training with a request for comments.

Responsibility for the accuracy, fairness and balance of the comments rests with the head of the agency.

Submissions and comments received

Response provided by the Director-General, Department of Education, Training and Employment on 2 May 2012.

RECEIVED

0 2 MAY 2012

2 MAY 2012

QUEENSLAND
AUDIT
OFFICE

Queensland Government

Department of
Education and Training

Mr Andrew Greaves
Auditor-General
Queensland Audit Office
PO Box 15396
CITY EAST QLD 4002

Dear Andrew

Thank you for your letter dated 2 April 2012 regarding the performance audit of student attendance processes and systems in Queensland State Schools.

While ensuring students attend school is a parental responsibility, schools and schooling systems work in partnership with parents and students to maximise student attendance.

Queensland has had a long standing commitment to promoting the importance of school attendance to students, parents and the community through its *Every Day Counts* initiative.

There are strong links between higher rates of school attendance and higher learning outcomes and the Department of Education, Training and Employment has consistently promoted the importance of school attendance in driving better learning outcomes to schools and the community.

It must be noted that school attendance rates are impacted by a range of factors, and in recent years, Queensland schools have been subject to the impact of situations, such as the extreme weather events of recent summers and other factors such as the swine flu pandemic, which have impacted on school attendance rates over this time. During these times, parents make judgements about student health and safety and students are often prevented from accessing school as a result of factors outside the school's control.

As the report highlights, attendance rates vary across schools, year levels, periods during the year and days of the week.

Establishing and maintaining high levels of school attendance for children, from the time they enter school, not only creates a foundation for stronger future patterns of attendance but also provides students with the basis for more successful learning pathways. Parents are key to instilling and reinforcing the importance of schooling from the start of a child's education.

Queensland state schools continue to put student attendance as a priority and it is pleasing to note from your report that schools have established effective practices in tracking and monitoring student attendance as part of their operations.

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Submissions and comments received

Response provided by the Director-General, Department of Education, Training and Employment on 2 May 2012.

2

The report recommends that the Department consider setting a minimum standard for attendance. This is a proposal that we will need to explore further as setting an arbitrary minimum threshold may lead to a range of unintended behaviours or consequences. It may also send conflicting messages to parents and students that unsatisfactory attendance is only triggered at a particular threshold and such a proposal may not be consistent with our current policy and legislative provisions.

Students exhibit a range of attendance patterns and, at the individual student level, schools monitor student attendance with the knowledge of the student's particular circumstances — for example, a student who has been hospitalised for chronic health reasons may have a lower attendance rate for this known reason. However, another student with a similar attendance rate who has regular unexplained or unauthorised absences presents a very different set of circumstances. These two cases require very different responses from the student and parents working with the school.

Your report found that overwhelmingly schools consider student attendance important and have processes in place to communicate with parents and invoke initiatives to support students and parents towards maximising student attendance. The Department believes that it is important for schools to work proactively with students and parents to overcome barriers to attendance.

The Department provides schools with a range of tools to support identification of student attendance rates and this information is used by schools to identify students and families who require additional support or guidance. Later this year, the Department will expand the reporting tools in *OneSchool* to further support schools' capacity to monitor student attendance. As part of their improvement planning processes, schools examine patterns of student attendance and identify strategies and targets towards maximising attendance.

It is extremely pleasing to read in the report that your officers found that the Department has clear policy guidance, procedural support and monitoring systems in place to support schools in monitoring and managing school attendance. The Department will investigate the recommended adjustments to these processes. The audit report recommendations also highlight the range of successful practices that schools, regional offices and central office have in place to support students and parents and I also acknowledge the work of Departmental staff in this regard. The Department will continue to explore how best to share good practice across schools.

The audit report also recommends that the Department assess the effectiveness of the processes used to enforce the provisions of the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (the Act) in improving student attendance. The Department views prosecutions as a last resort after other interventions and support have been exhausted, but still a necessary option in some cases. The prosecution provisions under the Act were recently reviewed and the associated penalties increased.

The recommendations made in the report will be explored by the Department with regard to the evidence base, practicality and cost of these suggestions.

Maximising school attendance remains a focus for all schools, with teachers and principals focused on improving the learning outcomes for all students. The audit report reinforces the importance of school attendance as a significant contributor to educational and life success and sends a powerful message to parents about ensuring their child attends school every day.

Submissions and comments received

Response provided by the Director-General, Department of Education, Training and Employment on 2 May 2012.

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I sincerely thank the Queensland Audit Office performance audit team for their efforts in providing the Department with this report and feel sure that it will prove to be a useful reference in our ongoing activity in this important area of our work.

Yours sincerely

Julie Grantham
Director-General

Ref: 12/134560

Enc

Appendix B |

Audit survey

Results of survey of principals

Number of schools surveyed: 119
Number of responses: 107
Response rate: 90 per cent.

Results of survey of principals

	Question	One School	SMS
Q1	How does this school record attendance?	50%	50%

	Question	Yes	No
Q2	Does this school use a third party tool to help manage attendance, e.g. ID Attend?	28%	72%

	Question	Not Sure	Not Important	Important	Very Important
Q4	What level of importance does this school place on monitoring attendance?	0%	0%	25%	75%
Q5	What level of importance does this school place on improving student attendance?	0%	0%	26%	74%

	Question	N/A	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Q6	SMS – PR – 036 provides clear guidance on how to record attendance in schools.	3%	1%	3%	8%	52%	33%
Q7	Absence reason codes to record student attendance are easy to interpret and apply.	1%	1%	18%	12%	48%	21%
Q8	The process to enforce parental obligations for a child of compulsory school age is effective in increasing attendance.	5%	18%	27%	23%	21%	6%
Q9	Letters advising parents of their legal obligations are effective in improving student attendance.	4%	11%	32%	18%	30%	6%
Q10	Assistance is provided by central office/ regional office to implement the policies and procedure.	1%	13%	21%	21%	38%	6%
Q11	SMS / OneSchool helpdesk provides useful advice on how to record student attendance.	9%	3%	8%	31%	43%	6%
Q12	I have a strong understanding of the strategies needed to improve attendance at this school.	0%	0%	5%	3%	56%	36%

	Question	N/A	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Q13	The strategies used by this school are helping achieve our school's attendance targets.	0%	0%	6%	13%	52%	29%
Q14	The strategies used by this school to increase attendance are well supported by the wider community.	0%	0%	7%	16%	47%	30%
Q15	Local police are proactive in assisting the school increase attendance.	16%	8%	19%	28%	21%	7%
Q16	Officers from the Department of Communities are involved in increasing attendance at this school.	19%	21%	27%	21%	10%	3%
Q17	Generally, parents in this community understand the importance of sending their children to school regularly.	0%	1%	9%	9%	50%	30%
Q18	The strategies used at this school to increase student attendance are evaluated regularly.	0%	0%	7%	12%	55%	25%
Q19	I would welcome further guidance on how to develop strategies to improve attendance.	2%	1%	10%	13%	40%	34%
Q20	This school works with other schools on ways to increase student attendance.	8%	4%	31%	21%	24%	12%
Q21	Students with patterns of irregular attendance are easily identified and monitored.	1%	2%	1%	1%	52%	43%
Q22	Attendance data is analysed regularly to identify trends and patterns of absenteeism.	3%	0%	6%	7%	47%	37%
Q23	Unexplained absences are consistently followed up within three days.	0%	0%	19%	9%	47%	25%
Q24	There is sufficient support to manage persistent non-attendance.	1%	20%	27%	16%	30%	7%
Q25	Reports on trends and patterns of attendance are generated regularly.	4%	0%	19%	17%	38%	22%
Q26	The School Performance Profile information regarding attendance is useful to manage my school's planning and review process.	0%	2%	10%	21%	49%	18%
Q27	The training available for staff at this school to analyse, monitor and report attendance is excellent.	1%	8%	27%	31%	28%	5%
Q28	Attendance is monitored by the Principal / Deputy Principal / authorised officer at your school.	21%	45%	60%	20%	23%	0%

	Question	Proportion
Q29	For the students at your school who have a history of poor attendance, please choose the five main causes:	
	Parental apathy	70%
	Student illness	69%
	Family issues (e.g. illness of carer, financial hardship)	68%
	Family holiday	52%
	School refusal	46%
	Student disengagement	45%
	Mental health concerns of student (e.g. anxiety, depression)	39%
	Avoidance of school assessments	15%
	Distance to travel to school	9%
	Unable to answer	6%
	Part time work commitments	4%
	Lack of varied curriculum	2%
	Bullying	1%

	Question	Proportion
Q30	The strategies your school has put in place to increase student attendance are:	
	Phone calls	95%
	Meeting parents	82%
	Letters (for individual absences)	79%
	Reward schemes	40%
	Awareness campaigns	40%
	Threat and use of legal sanctions	38%
	Attendance improvement plans	21%
	SMS texts to parents	20%
	Disciplinary action	19%
	Attendance officers	13%
	Truancy sweeps	11%
	Collaboration with business community	11%

Appendix C |

Audit method

Audit objective

The objective of this audit was to determine how effectively the Department of Education and Training (DET) and schools manage student attendance and implement strategies to increase attendance.

Specifically, the audit evaluated whether:

- policy, guidance and support provided by DET enables schools to effectively manage student attendance
- DET state-wide and school-level strategies have increased attendance
- monitoring and reporting of student attendance is efficient and effective.

In April 2012, the department was restructured and renamed, the Department of Education, Training and Employment.

Reason for the audit

Attending school regularly is a critical factor in student success, and irregular attendance can have serious consequences for students. National and international research confirms a link between attendance and student achievement, although the factors influencing attendance and achievement are numerous and interrelated in complex ways. Studies claim a link between low educational outcomes and a number of undesirable outcomes such as increased likelihood of welfare dependency, unemployment and in some cases involvement in the criminal justice system.

While the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* puts the responsibility of ensuring students attend school every day on parents, principals are required to monitor and report on student absences.

Performance audit approach

The audit was undertaken in accordance with the Auditor-General of Queensland Auditing Standards, which incorporate Australian auditing and assurance standards.

The audit of government schools was conducted between September 2011 and December 2011. The audit examined the strategies and systems in place at that time to manage the school attendance of compulsory year students in Queensland. The audit consisted of:

- interviews with key staff at central office, five regions and eight schools
- analysis of key documents with particular attention to policies and procedures, strategies, performance measures and collaboration
- analysis of available student attendance data from 2008 to 2011
- a survey of randomly selected schools, with 119 schools surveyed, and responses from 107 analysed.

Audit cost

The audit cost $480 000.

Auditor-General
Reports to Parliament

Tabled in 2012

Report No.	Title	Date tabled in Legislative Assembly
1	Improving student attendance	May 2012

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