

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE**

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS CONTAINED IN THE  
SIXTEENTH AUDIT REPORT OF 2015 ENTITLED "FOLLOW-ON: MANAGING STUDENT ATTENDANCE  
IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS"**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 13 JUNE 2018**

## **SESSION ONE**

### **Members**

**Dr A.D. Buti (Chair)  
Mr D.C. Nalder (Deputy Chair)  
Mr V.A. Catania  
Mr S.A. Millman  
Mrs L.M. O'Malley**

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**Hearing commenced at 9.35 am**

**Ms SHARYN O'NEILL**

**Director General, Department of Education, Department of Education, examined:**

**Mr LINDSAY HALE**

**Executive Director, Statewide Services, Department of Education, examined:**

**Mr MARTIN CLERY**

**Assistant Executive Director, Teaching and Student Support Services, Department of Education, examined:**

**Mr ALAN DODSON**

**Director, System and School Performance, Department of Education, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Welcome, and thank you for appearing today to discuss your department's response to the recommendations contained in the sixteenth Audit Report of 2015 entitled "Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australia Public Schools". My name is Tony Buti and I am the Chair of this committee, and I am the member for Armadale. To my left is Mr Dean Nalder, the committee's Deputy Chair, member for Bateman. Fellow committee members are: to Mr Nalder's left is Mr Vince Catania, member for North West Central; to my right is Mr Simon Millman, member for Mount Lawley; and to his right, Mrs Lisa O'Malley, member for Bickton.

I would also like to advise you that the committee has asked the new Auditor General, Ms Caroline Spencer, and her performance audit team to observe today's proceedings from the public gallery. Following the hearing, the committee may consult with the audit team for clarification on matters raised.

I would also like to advise that today's hearing will be broadcast live on the Parliament House website, and it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, this privilege does not apply to anything that you may say outside of today's proceedings.

I will ask you if you have any questions about your attendance today, and also if you would like to make a brief opening statement before we proceed with the questions, but before that, we only have an hour, so we would like to try and keep our questions as succinct as possible, and we would like if your answers could be as succinct as possible as well.

Do you have an opening statement you would like to make?

**Ms O'NEILL:** No, we will just go with your questions.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Okay, thank you very much. As you know, we are looking at the attendance issue in WA public schools, but before I ask that question, does the department also collect attendance rates for non-government schools?

**Mr DODSON:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** No.

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**Mr DODSON:** No, the non-government attendance rates are actually collected on a national basis by the Australian Government Department of Education, and are reported school by school on My School, where the government data also ends up. Some particular rules there: only year 1 to year 10 students, and they report on a rate as well as the proportion of students who are attending, 90 per cent or more.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I have a question. I want to get on to the specifics of the follow-up report from the Auditor General's office, but the policy that 90 per cent is a regular attendance, that means that a student can be away a day a fortnight and that is considered to be satisfactory. If you were away a day a fortnight from your work, I would not think that would be satisfactory, and in a 10-year school education, that would be one whole year. How can 90 per cent be considered to be satisfactory?

**Mr DODSON:** Personally, it is not. I think a rate more aligned with about 95 per cent would be a fairer thing, given that students do get sick, obviously during the winter season in particular, there is some natural use of that, but your figures are all correct, obviously, in terms of that one year. It is a lot of time, and the report from TKI that we were very heavily involved in in Western Australia makes it very clear that every day does count, and for every little slight improvement in the attendance rate you can get, you do get a measurable difference in things like NAPLAN, scores et cetera.

Ninety per cent has been set nationally. We have also used it on that basis, and it is something that we were using up to that point in time. We actually report in four categories of attendance. But, yes, we would certainly like to have a lot more students. In fact, there has been a change of culture, I think, away from the attendance rate to the proportion of students who make these categories of attendance. We are doing a review, which the guys can talk about, but I think one of the recommendations we may look at is to have our highest category of what is considered regular attendance moved up to 95 per cent.

**Ms O'NEILL:** I think it is fair to say that in schools, and from a policymaking perspective, we want children to be at school every day, but it is understood, with illness and other factors, that that is not going to be the case. So it is a reporting mechanism that has been placed nationally for some time. Certainly, in my experience, schools do not sit back and say, "Okay, we're only really pitching for 90 per cent." All the work that we do and they do is to get kids to school every day. From a reporting perspective, that has been a longstanding position.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Recommendation 4 talks about providing better and more transparent information in regards to student attendance, including in its annual reports, and it has been noted that you have moved to look at different categories, the level of educational risk, as you have mentioned. But school is a little bit confusing, because there might be a figure—78 per cent of students attend regularly, so presumably that is 78 per cent of the student population are attending 90 per cent or more, and then it might be 15 per cent are in one of the educational risk areas, but that is actually confusing. Could you not actually include absolute numbers of students?

**Mr DODSON:** We could, absolutely. Interesting enough, I know someone has said, "Oh, we could fill three football grounds", or something, so it becomes a very emotional debate on that basis, and it should do, because we want to encourage, as Sharyn said, kids to go to school every single day. Some 71.8 per cent of them are attending on that regular 90 per cent-plus basis, so many of those will be attending more than 90 per cent, obviously, and 3.9 per cent are at severe risk; they are in the less than 60 per cent—up to 60 per cent—and that is about 12 000 kids who get into that category. So we can certainly have the numbers. It is just a multiplication of the total number of our kids multiplied by the percentages, and the numbers can be made —

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**Ms O'NEILL:** We have provided absolute numbers I think previously at a committee like this or in estimates, so they are available; they just have not been reported generally in our annual report. But, obviously, to work out the percentages, we have the absolute numbers, so we know how many children make up each of those categories.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Because I sit on a number of school boards, and that would probably be the easiest place to do it. Even there, they still just present the percentages. I think it would be better if you actually had absolute numbers.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Yes, it does, I think, give people a bit more concrete understanding of, well, what does that mean? We tend to work in percentages, but percentages of what? So, as you say, on a school board, how many children every day are not there is a more concrete discussion than perhaps a percentage. So that is something certainly that we can—and we do—talk to schools about, about the way they report to their councils and boards and their broader community about a range of matters, including attendance. But the point is, I think, a good one. For a lot of people, it does not make a lot of sense until you know what does that mean and how many children is that representing.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I will just ask one more question before I pass on to my colleagues. Now a greater percentage of schools are becoming IPS, so in regards to attendance, are you devolving that responsibility more and more to each individual school? Secondly, what are you doing, I think it is in regards to recommendation 5, in providing assistance to schools to build and maintain partnership in the local areas to address student attendance issues?

**Ms O'NEILL:** There is no distinction with attendance, whether a school is an IPS school or not. The policy of the government, of the department and the requirements to report are the same whether you are IPS or non-IPS. All schools have devolved responsibility or authority to manage attendance at the school site in any case, so on attendance, there is no distinction of whether you are IPS or non-IPS. The expectations of getting kids to school every day, to have innovative strategies to try and arrest the decline of some students in terms of their attendance, that expectation is absolute for any school regardless, as is the way in which they report, as is their application of the act and policies, so there is no distinction.

In terms of recommendation 5, greater work in helping schools to build and maintain partnerships, again, there would be no distinction there in relation to whether they are IPS or not. But one of the things that, either with this question or with a question later that we would like to talk about is the good progress we have made around the Student Attendance Toolkit work that arose, I think, post the OAG report and informed by that, which we think, following the report done by the OAG and our response, has been a significant addition to the armoury of schools in terms of working on attendance. From what I am told, certainly schools' response to us to has been very positive that this has been a very good move and great support to the work that they are doing. Attendance is a very difficult issue, as I am sure you all understand. It is very hard to effect any change, so we are open to all and every idea, quite genuinely, to shift some of those really difficult students and families and communities around attendance. But the Student Attendance Toolkit, which provides a wide range of resources to support schools, I think has been a really important move, and schools are reporting that it has been of great support to them, so if there is an occasion during this hearing, we can talk a little more about that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Why do you not do that right now?

**Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY:** I was just going to say, because that was a question that I was going to ask.

**Ms O'NEILL:** I am just being guided by you.

**Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY:** Just on the toolkit, if I could, just to—

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**Ms O'NEILL:** I might ask Mr Clery if he could talk a bit more about that.

**Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY:** Absolutely, whoever is best to advise on that. So I guess a brief description of what the toolkit is, how it is applied, what the rollout has been like, and uptake.

**Mr CLERY:** Okay, sure. The toolkit is an online resource that is accessible through our portal for all schools and all employees in the department. It is built of about 170 individual resources, which range from some of the things around the fundamentals of attendance, just what the attendance categories are and how they should be applied, and processes for appropriate monitoring and recording, through to a range of strategies that schools can select from, modify and apply in their context. They again range from things like parent information sheets, suggestions for articles in newsletters—that all draws on the TKI research and other pieces of evidence around the importance of attendance—right down to messages and strategies that individual teachers can apply in their classroom around working with individual kids and encouraging their attendance and participation. Things like some videos for schools to be able to use and share with their community, and there is a range of resources that seek to sit inside that space.

The uptake of it: it actually has a built-in survey mechanism for people to provide feedback and suggestions and ideas. One of the things that has come out of that actually is schools providing information about what they are doing that has actually been able to be captured and shared as case studies for other schools and other staff.

We recently did a more formal survey—I say “recently”, it is probably getting back about 12 months or so ago now; term 4 of last year. We targeted 100-odd schools, I think, in that survey, and the response back from those schools was that the toolkit had provided them with some resources and advice that they thought was positive and constructive.

**Ms O'NEILL:** We had feedback: 97 per cent of the respondents were using it in some way, and I think it is fair to say that some were more advanced than others, because it was new; 85 per cent thought the toolkit was effective and gave a good framework and direction and some realistic strategies, and I think, as part of that survey, they also gave us some feedback about some things that they thought would be helpful considerations for the future.

So that is, from our perspective, a really positive step towards giving them more practical solutions. I think the OAG report also encourages to make sure everyone was across all of the detail of the policy and the requirements, so the toolkit has built that in as well. Appropriate reporting et cetera. It also has a module in there in terms of target setting to assist schools in that regard too. So it picked up quite a few of the matters that were appropriately outlined in the report that we are considering.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Through what you have just described, anecdotal evidence that this has been positively received, what is the hard data showing at this point in time around student attendances at those schools that particularly have a problem? If you take the bottom 10 per cent, that would really make up a large percentage that are not getting there. Are we seeing any evidence that it has improved the attendance rates in those bottom 10 per cent, bottom 50 per cent—whatever it may be?

**Ms O'NEILL:** It would be unusual to see anything that quickly, but that aside, I think it is fair to say that attendance rates over the past probably as long as I have been director general have remained about the same, and before me, so it is hard to get a shift in the data. I would like to be able to report that, as a result of the Student Attendance Toolkit, we have seen a bump in the data. We have not, and we probably would not yet, because the data will be collected during this semester. Has that already happened?

**Mr DODSON:** Just at the end of this semester.

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**Ms O'NEILL:** So our next collection will be at the end of semester 1, so at the end of June of this year, in any case. I would never put money on seeing a bump in attendance data as a result of resources like that. They will be helpful, the anecdotal information is strong, but every other state including us struggles to make a difference with attendance. It is a deeply disturbing problem that we have across Australia, and it is as much about life outside of school as it is inside of school. So I reflect on the sorts of activities we do, in communities in particular, places that I have worked and some of us have worked, where we drive to the home, where we have people who get kids out of bed, we feed them, we clothe them, we dress them, we give them breakfast, we give them a safe place, we wash their clothes, we give them after-school care, entire wraparound services, and even those deeply supportive community—particularly low SES community activities, it is even hard to get a shift—particularly in families where the child is the only person getting up to go anywhere. So that does not mean that we do not ever stand back from that. It is a deeply social problem. We have a very big part to play in it in terms of making school a place where kids want to be, where they are engaged, where they feel safe, but it is a much bigger problem. So the resources that we are providing provide more and more support into schools, but some of the activities that I think are going to make a difference are those that are in and outside of school, the work that we are doing with the child and parent centres, for example; the work we are doing at Armadale Senior High School, with more of a wraparound style service in that school, we are running a pilot there. I would not want to say to the committee that I would expect to see a jump in the statistics as a result of those support services; I think that will be a help.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Can I come back to the key objectives of what you are trying to achieve? Are those key objectives to improve attendance rates, or are they to provide a feel-good solution for people that are actually working in this troubling situation? Because I would actually argue that if you are putting resources in—we have finite resources—and if they are not delivering a particular outcome, surely you are clear that the objectives are to improve attendance rates, otherwise there is an inappropriate link between reporting attendance rates and doing these type of activities if you do not see anything meaningful and beneficial in the results, and those resources would be better directed elsewhere.

**Ms O'NEILL:** I do not want to be misunderstood. I am absolutely clear about what the objective is, our department is and our policies are, and that is to have children in school every day, because that makes a difference to their learning and their life's outcome, so the objective is absolute. The point I am making is that there is no one solution. If there was, we would have done it, and so would have every other state. It has to be multi-disciplined, it has to be multi-pronged, and the support that we are providing as one of those opportunities or one of those strategies through the student toolkit is a very important piece of support that in and of itself is unlikely to be—there is going to be one thing that will shift the results in terms of student attendance. If there was one thing, we would have done it this year, last year, and every other year. So the point that I am trying to make is that this is one important piece, but it has to be done alongside a whole range of other things, and the school has control over some of those interventions but not all of them.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Is it therefore fair to say that unless these other things are done, then this is not going to deliver a better outcome, therefore in the area of finite resources—I mean, we are seeing institutions around the world throw more money into education but not necessarily delivering a better outcome, and we seem to be chasing our tail. Is there a risk that we keep putting money out without solving the complete problem, and therefore it is money that is not necessarily directing a particular outcome?

**Ms O'NEILL:** My view from a policy position is that you have to maintain the momentum on every front around attendance. It is almost a proxy in some ways. It can be a proxy for family dysfunction,

poverty—these are big issues that require the attention of all departments. We do work with other departments, we work with non-government agencies and we work with the commonwealth government. This requires everyone's attention, and I do not think it is a matter for us that we can kind of pull the plug on one thing, because teachers need support to make the classroom engaging. They need the kind of support through this toolkit to be able to direct their attention to the right areas. We have to work in the early years; we have to work in the middle years; we are working in the senior years to keep kids engaged; we are working with Child protection; we are working with Health. It requires total investment, because it goes beyond the classroom. It goes to families, and in some families, as I said, the child is the only person getting up. No-one works. There is no aspiration for work. So it is a really complex set of circumstances, which I think the report also points to, and I do not think there is one solution to it, and I would not be confident in saying the toolkit is not going to make the difference, therefore we should pull the plug on it. I think it is going to support teachers who are at the frontline in schools and trying to get these kids there every day and I think sometimes doing superhuman things to make that happen.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** But is it not fair that if we do not see—I accept that there may not be a huge improvement on any particular program or whatever, but if you go in with an objective that is to increase participation or increase attendance, and you put a program in with funding allocated to it to specifically attend to this attendance, then is it not right that the community should expect an improvement in attendance, albeit maybe a small amount, or something? That is the point of testing things. I understand we have to try things and do things differently, because doing the same thing is never going to improve it. I understand that, but there must come a point where we actually assess it and say, “Hey, has that delivered?” And if the objectives are attendance rates which we are reporting then surely we should be expecting an improvement in attendance rates. Surely that is a basic expectation we should have.

**Ms O'NEILL:** We would review all of our programs and make adjustments to—we are seeking consistent improvement or constant improvement all of the time, so we would make adjustments to any of our programs and projects, as we have done for years, to see if we can make a difference. The commonwealth had a particular program out in regions where they funded the remote school attendance scheme, I think it is called. We made a decision that parts of that were making absolutely no difference. Sometimes making a difference is maintaining your numbers, not just getting a bump.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Yes, I understand that. You do not want it to get worse.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Sometimes it was going backwards. So we made a change and offered a different policy solution there. So we do not sit on our hands and not monitor, or we are not unwilling to make a change. Of course we are. But sometimes the decision is around, in some communities, maintaining the numbers that they have is a good outcome in a certain circumstance.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** I just want to finish on this thread. I accept that you do not want things to deteriorate, but we are talking about new programs, new funding, and we are looking for outcomes of this funding, and I do not think a zero outcome should be acceptable from something that requires a funding program to be put in place. So it would have to be reviewed at some point to say that we have seen a shift.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Of course, yes.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** And it has to be an agreed shift with obviously the minister gets involved and everything else, but our responsibility is the public accounts of Western Australia, so we are looking at, and we have to make sure, that any investment is a wise investment.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Yes.

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**Mr D.C. NALDER:** So it is common sense therefore that we should be saying, well, what are the outcomes here, and if it is not delivering outcomes, what are you doing about it?

[10.00 am]

**Ms O'NEILL:** I accept the premise, obviously, of that question. The student toolkit was put in in the last term of 2017, and we are two terms in, with schools just starting to make some use of that, so it would be too early to give you that assurance.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Yes, I agree.

**Ms O'NEILL:** But I certainly accept the premise of the question. If you are investing in something, you want to see some return on that, and we are accountable to this committee for those investments, and to our minister, so we would be monitoring and reporting any increase in that. But I think there is the absolute student attendance; the other part, and I think you referred to it as “feel-good”, I do not see it that way. The other part of the student toolkit, and arising from the OAG report also, is that our staff have asked for more help. That is an outcome worthy of consideration. I know the ultimate outcome, of course, is the attendance rates—I am not making comment about that—but the secondary outcome of teachers feeling that they have the right mechanisms, tools and support is also a good outcome, and we are on track, I guess, at least to deliver that support as well.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** That is why right at the outset I questioned the objectives. If you have objectives that have multiple approaches, or multiple outcomes, or multiple solutions, then that should be clearly defined in the objectives of what you are trying to achieve. So why I asked the specific question, and it was focused really on the attendance rates, hence I have stayed there. But what you are now coming back to—and I always put objectives before everything else: objectives, strategic action. So you are now changing the objectives and saying, “Well, there is this benefit.” Now, that might be something that gets determined on the way through, and other things, but you have taken it on a different thread from what has been reported, which is attendance rates.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Perhaps I should be more clear then. I do not think that I have changed the objective. Everything that we do in attendance has the ultimate objective of getting kids to school, so that is the objective. Programs and strategies can have secondary objectives, so while that one is absolute, part of the approach for the student toolkit—we would not give teachers support for student attendance if the ultimate objective was not to improve student attendance, so, of course, improving student attendance is the ultimate objective. Giving them more tools and more support enables them to achieve that objective, so I do not believe that I have talked about a change in objective at all. The ultimate objective is getting kids into school every day. In order to do that, we are providing more support to teachers and staff.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** Is that outcome possible? You say the ultimate objective is getting more students into school every day, but the numbers are not shifting, and there is a range of strategies that have been deployed by the department, and the numbers are not shifting. You talk about socioeconomic factors, which I appreciate, and you talk about the need for a multifaceted approach, and you talk about how you have momentum and how you are searching for constant improvement, and yet the numbers still are not shifting. Talking in esoteric terms about getting every student to school every day is laudable and commendable, but the numbers still are not shifting. So my question is: is an outcome possible?

**Ms O'NEILL:** I might just ask Alan, from a statistical perspective.

**Mr DODSON:** I do not think there is any doubt that if we can get even just a few kids, and I think in the report it said at one stage that for some schools, if you can just get a few more kids attending

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one or two more days a week, you would shift your figures in terms of the amount of people that were in that regular attendance category quite quickly.

We are battling some other issues here, though. Even in the mid to high socioeconomic area, we have an increase in the number of families who think it is okay to take their kids on holidays, and fly in, fly out issues, and all the rest, where the holiday thing has become a big thing. It is 14 per cent or something of the unauthorised absences, and we have made it very clear it is an unauthorised absence to take your kid out, dare I say it, on multiple times during the year to Bali or somewhere else, and that is a newish phenomena that is being addressed. As Sharyn said, keeping things stable is not what you necessarily want to do, but when you are pushed with that sort of pressure, that is actually a good outcome, because other things have improved.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** So are you seeing that? You are saying that attendance is dropping amongst higher SES because people are taking their children to Bali?

**Mr DODSON:** It did over the last few years, yes.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** Yes, so we are seeing a better result in Armadale because the students from Mt Lawley are going on holiday?

**Mr DODSON:** No, it is not that. No, no. The reasons for their absences are clearly about some choices that are being made, and there is new phenomena getting into that territory. That may mean that they are not missing other days because the parents are saying, "Oh, well, we will let you have the last two weeks of school or the first and last week of school", or something, but then they are very encouraging the rest of the time in those particular things. It is swings and roundabouts there. But certainly the message that we are looking at—and there has been just a slight increase, but how much, it is at the margins. At the moment we are talking 0.2, 0.3 per cent changing things. We have not been brave enough to set a target to say, "Look, we really want X", apart from saying we want all kids to attend regularly, as Sharyn has mentioned.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** Yes, sure. Everyone wants all kids to attend regularly, but part of our obligation is to say what is specific and measurable and where are we going to arrive at. The Chair started by asking you a question about the 90 per cent threshold. You could have high SES kids whose parents are taking holidays in Bali who, because they have so much latitude in that 10 per cent non-attendance, still would not drop out of that category, so is this phenomenon that you are talking about shifting people from one category to another? Is it shifting them out of that top—

**Mr DODSON:** For some kids, it would, yes, absolutely. There would be some shifts in that. But it does come back to just trying to make sure that whatever the reason for not attending, unless it is a reasonable excuse such as sickness, cultural reasons, and there are a few other reasons, obviously, why kids can be absent for a period of time, that despite that, you want to minimise all the rest. We know from the research that the unexplained absences—these are the really difficult ones to get at here—they are the biggest issue, and they have the biggest impact in terms of when you relate them to NAPLAN and all the rest.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** So we are hypothesising what might be some of the reasons for those unexplained absences. Have we been able to interrogate why those absences are unexplained, like what are the other factors that are contributing to them, so that they can become —

**Mr DODSON:** So they extensively happen in low socioeconomic communities, with the lack of engagement from parents et cetera.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** So now that you have an explanation for those unexplained absences, what particular strategies can the department deploy so that, to come back to my first question, an outcome becomes possible?

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**Mr DODSON:** I think that is where the toolkit that they are talking about is—it is trying to address, again, 170 resources. There are all sorts of things that schools can be considering to try and make sure that, despite other factors—and just being low socioeconomic does not mean you do not care for your kids or want them to go to school—do not get that sort of impression at all, because that is not the case—but trying to impress on the community the importance of it, and the toolkit, I am sure, is very much addressing the fact that you want to try and make those connections and partnerships with families to get those kids to school.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** Is there a role to be played for agencies outside the Department of Education in terms of that cultural shift?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Perhaps, on this matter, one of the things that we did a couple of years ago is we went back out to parents, and apart from just a few years ago, we have been doing it since, to explain to them that attendance is not an option, it is actually the law. Not everyone understands that. I just had a parent saying to me the other day when I was in the shops, and it was their child's birthday, and so they had their birthday off. That is not an unusual occurrence. It is the law, there is a requirement, and the onus is actually on the parent or the caregiver to get the child to school. That is actually, at law, where the onus sits. And so it is only more recently that we have been looking more closely at that unauthorised—we have always had unauthorised—authorised absences, but we have been having a closer look, and I cannot remember the year, perhaps Alan might, when we started introducing the data recording around —

**Mr DODSON:** Yes, so the unauthorised absence vacations came in just after 2014, I think.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Yes, where we had this anecdotal, at least, understanding of the holiday, the FIFO arrangements, the birthday day, so we have been trying to understand that. It is hard to dig into why unexplained absences are unexplained. Part of the problem is that they are unexplained, and the parents, despite going back to them and seeking explanations, because it might just be that they have not brought in the medical certificate or something, some parents do not explain. So when we can talk to them more and have them understand that relationship—sometimes third parties—when it gets to, I guess, a point of even greater concern, we did work with the previous Department for Child Protection, now part of the Department for Communities, and it is possible now that unexplained absences or absences can be used as part of a mechanism for a Responsible Parenting Agreement, and there are some numbers here somewhere, but we have had an increase in the number of those agreements that are being used; quite a significant increase over the past few years. So obviously we want to be supportive, but it is the law, it does have a big impact on a child's future, so with the—okay, the number of Responsible Parenting Agreements in 2015 was 80 and in 2017, 149. So we are trying to work with other departments, and we always have, as well as our own.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** That is a heartening response. My last question is on the toolkit and the uptake of the toolkit. That is a voluntary measure at the moment; is that right?

**Mr CLERY:** Yes.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** My concern is that the good schools have a tendency to do all the right things well. How is the uptake amongst the schools that are struggling with attendance? Have we seen a good uptake in that toolkit with the schools that need it the most? Is this resource being applied in the most important —

**Mr HALE:** We would probably have to examine, go back and have a look at that, and make some judgements about it.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** Could I put that as a question on notice to you, because that is an important question.

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**Mr HALE:** Yes. So I think the difficulty is when one describes a school as a good school, I mean—

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes, the point is a lot of the schools where the attendance is bad, it is not because they are not a good school.

**Mr HALE:** In fact, my guess would be, as a former principal, they are probably the schools likely to be most engaged with the toolkit, because they are the ones with the greatest need. But I understand the intent of the question is where is the accountability in the system. So I think the important thing to remember there is the toolkit is a resource to assist people, amongst other resources—it is not the only resource—but alongside that we do have attendance policy and procedures which spell out the requirements of every school to address these issues. Those policy and procedures are, I think, about to commence a review, or are in review now.

**Mr CLERY:** They are under review at the moment, yes.

**Mr HALE:** So schools are accountable for meeting the requirements of that policy and procedures. The toolkit is one of a range of resources they can engage with to do that. Ultimately, I think, though, we continue to monitor schools where we have issues through, in the past, most recently it has been the expert review group, and the forthcoming school review process, engagement properly with the attendance issues is a part of school accountability. It is expected of every school.

**Ms O'NEILL:** We might get some clarity, actually, on the actual question, because I am not sure whether you are asking are we trying to target schools that have particular attendance issues or—so perhaps if we could just be clear.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** Yes, I accept your position on good schools; that was my mistake. I withdraw that and I apologise for that. What I mean is are the schools that are most in need of support and assistance when it comes to dealing with the issue of school attendance taking up the strategies that you have all mentioned this morning as a key component of remedying this issue? Are they the ones who are taking it up?

**Mr HALE:** I think we would have to take that on notice, and, of course, there are other strategies which the department supports and invests in that do target schools with a particular need or a particular strata of students.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Perhaps what we can provide is whether there is a good match between the take-up of the tool and those that experience probably some of the most problematic attendance rates.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** For me, I would be happy with that.

**Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY:** Total figures as well. The total uptake.

**Ms O'NEILL:** In terms of the number of schools?

**Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY:** Yes.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Now, they will all be at different stages, so, Chair, what we will do is do our best to convey the numbers who are engaging, using the tool, but there might be a bit of a range of to what extent at this point, because it is still pretty new.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** In terms of attendance, do you have a breakdown, or is there a difference between regional attendance and metropolitan attendance? Do you have a breakdown? Is there a difference?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Yes.

**Mr DODSON:** Yes, we actually produced some data on a regional basis, obviously a school basis, so each of the different regions would have all of the same data available.

**Ms O'NEILL:** I think it is reported in the annual report, is it?

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**Mr DODSON:** No, not by region.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Okay. So we do have it by region.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Are you able to supply that by region?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Do you want region versus metro or region by region?

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Each region would be good.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Each region. We probably have it embedded in stuff here now. It might be just best if we put it on —

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Is there a difference between regional attendance and —

**Mr DODSON:** Yes.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** What is it? Do you have that figure on hand?

**Mr DODSON:** Take the north metro, for example. North metro's current attendance, six —

**Ms O'NEILL:** Do we have, though, a region versus metro sort of split absolute?

**Mr DODSON:** No, the one I have in front of me is just region by region.

**Ms O'NEILL:** But just as a rule of thumb, the further you get away from the metro, the worse the attendance.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** That is my point, that you have a 90 per cent rate that you want to try and achieve, but in reality, is that figure affected by the regions in more remote regions in Western Australia? Does that have a dramatic effect on the amount?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Yes.

**Mr CLERY:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** So in terms of directing resources to those communities, I think, Lindsay, you said that there are wraparound supports for those particular schools. Is that strategy working? And the other question is, you mentioned there are other government departments that you work with: do you find that the resources, the further you get from Perth, that those resources are less and the burden is shouldered more on Education rather than those other areas, government departments who perhaps have lost resources, which has an ultimate effect on kids actually attending school, for various unexplained reasons, which I will not go into because we do not have enough time.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Yes, the first premise of the question, if you look at the Kimberley, the Kimberley results are worse than metro.

**Mr DODSON:** It is 76.3 in the Kimberley.

**Ms O'NEILL:** So the divide by aboriginality, obviously, the results are pretty difficult too. In terms of agencies, in a lot of remote places, some that you know about, we are the only agency there. So, I guess, in terms of attendance, we are the front line. But we do work closely with other agencies to try and minimise some of that differentiation we developed a couple of years ago Statewide Services, so we have a group—they are based in Perth—but they have outreach to all regional areas and they go out to ensure that those regional places have that kind of support.

But it is fair to say that attendance and the difficulties that sit around that, if you are in a remote Aboriginal community such as Burringurrah—one that you know pretty well—police are helpful if it becomes a police matter, even in terms of just supporting the school, are terrific; Child Protection and others such as Health, when they are there, are helpful. So I think it is a good collaboration, but in remote communities, we are the frontline.

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**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Given, say, the Gascoyne region, which you mentioned, say DCP have 50 cases that they are working on and only two staff to be able to work on that. That is 50 families having an impact on attendance on schools, be it Burringurrah or Carnarvon school. So how do you expect to put your support services into those schools to increase the attendance when you have another area not having the appropriate staff to work with those families with some of those issues? That must have a bearing on your attendance.

**Ms O'NEILL:** It is probably not appropriate for me to make an uninformed comment about the resourcing of other agencies and departments. What I know is in those places, everyone is trying to maximise the resources they have and work closely together.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Okay. Maybe we could use some royalties for regions money.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Except you have taken it all away.

**Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY:** Just on the advisory panels, I noted in the report that there had not, at the time of the report, been a way to measure for effectiveness implemented, so has there been some changes in that area?

**Mr CLERY:** There has been an evaluation conducted of the attendance advisory panels. The general finding around the panels was that they had an initial positive impact on the attendance of the young people that the panel was convened around. Unfortunately, there was a tendency for those young people's previous attendance patterns to re-emerge not all that far down the track.

**Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY:** Given that they are the most at-risk students, children, have other strategies therefore been implemented, and has it been that the attendance advisory panels are now deemed as not being particularly effective, or are they still being implemented?

**Mr HALE:** There are two bits to that. The one I was going to comment on is I think what we have learned from the evaluation and from experience as the number of panels increase is that our well-intended approach of targeting the most severely at risk for attendance panels turned out to be not a terribly good idea. The fact is those hardest to reach people were the people with the most entrenched challenges with school attendance. The attendance panels, actually, we can see over time, do not provide the assistance we had hoped they would. They are actually probably a better strategy for those people who are on the cusp of being at risk, or are at risk but not in the really severe category. So I think our judgement would be there is still a use for attendance panels, but we would probably need to rethink the encouragement we give to people about how they are best targeted. That leaves us with this really challenging problem of those in the most severe risk category. They are the same people, frankly, who are the most challenging for every support agency. They are the hardest-to-reach people, they are the people who probably it is hardest to find an explanation for the challenge, and I think, frankly, we are struggling with that.

I think one of the areas that I am very hopeful that as we progress with some work we are doing in the Kimberley schools project, because that is mostly in small communities, it will not be ultimately—it will go to some of the larger communities as well—but initially in small communities at least there is some hope there of working with the community and families right from the very early years, and this is where it becomes slow work. This is what TKI research has shown us: you want to get in with people at preschool years and play groups, start building relationships, start building the habit of coming, start having young mum or auntie or dad or whoever come along as well, and then progressively build by building a stronger relationship, stronger schooling. The more school success, the more likely a young person is at having success at school as they get a little bit older, because we know one of the drop-off points is going to be age 10, 11, when they start to go, "What's the point of this?" If they are having success, they are more likely to come back. So I think they are the sorts of things we need to look at next, and a lot of that is going to be about, sure, there

are broad strategies you can apply anywhere, but you actually need to go in in those cases, school by school, and help school leaders and teachers to work out how to work in this particular community.

**Ms O'NEILL:** The panels are complicated by the fact they are voluntary, so the person has to want to have an attendance panel, and if you are a family in dysfunction, that might not always be your number one priority at that time. The evaluation we had done pointed to some better practices, but in terms of a return on investment, any of these things are incredibly time-consuming to establish, to get the people there. Often it is all established and you have all these great people coming in to help but the family does not come. So it is something we want to keep offering, because it is helpful for families, if they will engage.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In regards to recommendation 4 about the reporting, there was mention about targets. You do not actually have targets; is that correct?

**Mr DODSON:** I think it is a stated target that we want all our kids to attend regularly. That is a general stated target.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Could you look at maybe individual schools and say, "The attendance rate is this and we are going to try to get to that target"?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Individual schools set targets for themselves. Not all schools might have that as their highest priority, if their attendance generally is healthy, but we do have schools that set targets, and the student toolkit provides support and guidance around that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would it not be a good idea, though, for the department to look at schools where attendance is an issue and say that you have to set targets, and that should be reported and be in the annual report?

**Mr DODSON:** That basically is the message for schools that have an issue in this area.

**The CHAIRMAN:** But is it mandated?

**Ms O'NEILL:** I think, while the guidance is given with this student toolkit, it is not the practice currently to identify individual schools and mandate a target. That being said, there are very few schools that have real attendance issues that do not have it as their number one priority and a target.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Okay, just a couple of issues. Dean raised some very interesting questions, which I think were a little bit hard for you to answer. The issue is that you do not have a control group. You cannot say, "We are going to do this for this group and not proceed and do it for that group." That is the only real way you can see if something is working, and I think you have to just go on your professional instincts to see if the things that you are doing are working or not.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Although we do have the national network. All states are grappling with the same problems, and we share strategies all of the time and try and get some effect and information from that, but because it is so hard to isolate the effect of whether a teacher is getting support against whether the family is on some particular cultural activity and out, or people are sick, or poverty, the child does not want to come to school because they do not have a uniform, it is very hard to isolate one factor. Attendance is a social issue, so it is very hard to return on the investment of one strategy over another strategy. It is very hard to isolate the factor, and it is a known problem.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I just note from my own experience in my own electorate, you can actually pretty well identify the major issue of why someone is not attending.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Family by family.

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**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes. You mentioned the phenomena of people going to Bali et cetera. There is a fundamental difference, though, often, between those kids that are going to Bali—hopefully they are going to better places than Bali—than the kids that are not coming because of dysfunctionality in the family, because often those kids that are going on holidays, there is no dysfunctionality. It actually might be quite educational. I am not saying Bali would necessarily be, but if they are going to Europe or whatever. So there is a fundamental difference as to why they are absent. I do not think they should be lumped into one category.

**Ms O'NEILL:** There is a fundamental difference, but at law it is the same problem.

**The CHAIRMAN:** At law, which brings me to the point that—and it was interesting that you said that you now had these parental responsibility agreements, because my experience, and one of my great criticisms of the former Department for Child Protection, now part of the Department for Communities, is that they did not get involved. They would not get involved if a student was not attending. They did not see that as part of their purview.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Under the previous government, some work was done so that poor attendance can be used as a trigger, not the trigger, for them to be involved. It has to be one of a number of triggers, but in the past it was not even one of the considerations.

**The CHAIRMAN:** To me, it can be the trigger. If a student is not attending 50 per cent of the time, in my eyes, it is neglect.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Yes. It is a government policy matter.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In my electorate, lower socioeconomic, actually all but I think one of my schools has 90 per cent or above attendance, I think. The one school that does not, has a pretty bad attendance rate. I sit on that board as well, and they are doing so much, and why that school is not able to move its attendance rate and the other schools can, it is not due to the teacher or the headmaster, I can assure you. It is really unexplainable. Well, actually, I think it is explainable, but I will leave that for another day.

**Ms O'NEILL:** It is true to say there are schools that buck the norm. I would not want anyone to take the message away, if you are in a low SES school, your attendance is poor. We have some schools, if you look at Challis, and other ones that you are familiar with in that area —

**The CHAIRMAN:** Gwynne Park.

**Ms O'NEILL:** —who do enormous work. I would want one of the messages to be that school staff and communities and boards and parents go over and above to ensure, in some pretty difficult areas, that kids are at school and doing well, and that is the number one message. But I think the committee is right to be, as we do, exercising our mind over and over around this as one of those problems it is very hard to shift, despite enormous investments of subsequent previous and future governments, I am sure. And if there was an easy solution to it, we would have hoped to have found it.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Just back on the fact that the program was implemented back in December, when is an appropriate timeframe to be able to review the success of the program with the kits and so forth?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Are you talking about the Student Attendance Toolkit?

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** Yes, the teachers and the students and the whole program around the toolkit. I look at it as a program. I assume that is how you are viewing it?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Well, it is a voluntary resource. I think we should not overplay that. It is a support—it is a toolkit. It is a tool that schools can opt to use to assist them with improving students' attendance, so it is not a policy, it is not a mandated requirement; it is a toolkit for support.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** So just on that, if there are some schools that have particularly bad rates, is it not in your interest, overseeing some of these, to go, “We want you to do this”?

**Ms O’NEILL:** Absolutely, and that is why we work directly with those schools to encourage them to take it up —

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** But you still do not mandate it?

**Ms O’NEILL:** Well, there might be five, 50 or 300 other resources that that school might be feeling they are going to have greater success with. There is an abundance of resources. The first introduction of this toolkit was to let people become familiar with it, to get some improvement on those resources. They are resources but they are not the only resources that are available to schools.

**Mr D.C. NALDER:** I understand why you would trial it, and trialling specifics in particular areas, but if it is then successful, would you look at then mandating it, or would you always make it voluntary?

**Ms O’NEILL:** We are open to anything that works. As I said—I think one of the first things I said in this hearing—we will have a look, as we have already done, I think we have mentioned we have done some anecdotal survey stuff about whether it has been useful in schools, school by school. We will do that. What is a reasonable time, we monitor programs, but I would think, with a problem like attendance, most schools would try something for a couple of years before they would feel like it was really a reasonable time to make an evaluation of whether that has had an impact school by school, and it is school by school. So, given it is a resource, we would monitor and talk to the people who are using it, and if we found that to be the new silver bullet, then we would mandate it, if its effect was that significant.

**Mr HALE:** I think it is difficult to mandate what is essentially a resource, but what we would do—what we would always do—is as we review our policy and procedures, which are the mandated requirements, if there was something we learned out of the use of the toolkit that we thought would be applicable across the board or in particular cases and it should be mandated, that would be where we would —

**Ms O’NEILL:** We would put it into the policy.

**Mr HALE:** That is where it would go.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much. We may have some follow-up questions.

Thank you very much for attending today. We will forward a copy of this hearing for you for the correction of transcription errors. Please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of receipt. If the transcript is not returned within this period it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee’s consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence.

Thank you once again.

**Mr SEWELL:** Thank you.

**Hearing concluded at 10.33 am**

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