



## **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE**

*Chair: Dr Tony Buti, MLA*

**MEDIA RELEASE**  
3 December 2018

# Committee Report on Dept of Education's management of student attendance

---

On Thursday of last week, the Public Accounts Committee tabled its eighth report of the 40<sup>th</sup> session of Parliament.

The report, *Setting the Stage for Improvement*, summarises to committee's follow-up of the Department of Education's response to the recommendations contained in the Auditor General's 2015 report *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*.

The committee's report is available via [this link](#), and a copy of the committee's Executive Summary is appended on the following pages for your information.

Enquiries about the report can be directed to Dr Tony Buti, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee via the Committee Secretariat on 9222 7496.

## **PAC Report No. 8 *Setting the Stage for Improvement* – Executive Summary**

Despite the Department of Education's efforts to address student attendance, there has been a consistent lack of progress. In 2009, the Auditor General found over one quarter of Western Australian public school children did not attend school regularly.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the Auditor General found student attendance had not improved.<sup>2</sup>

When students do not attend school, their education is at risk.

In this report, we follow-up the Auditor General's Report No. 16 of 2015 *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*. In doing so, we outline the extent to which the Department of Education (the Department) has addressed the audit recommendations.

Under the Department's *Student Attendance Policy*, schools have primary responsibility for managing student attendance. Nevertheless, the Department must provide schools with the conditions necessary to understand and respond to student absence. This includes strategic direction, data, guidelines, and an understanding of what works to address student attendance. This central leadership and support sets the stage for improvement in student attendance.

Since the 2015 audit report, the Department has made some changes to improve its centralised guidance to schools. Namely, the online Student Attendance Toolkit was introduced to give schools resources, tools and guidance to record and manage student attendance. Despite this improvement, further work is needed to address the Auditor General's recommendations and improve processes for supporting schools to manage student attendance.

Notably, the Department does not proactively identify schools in need of support to manage severe student attendance issues. Instead, schools are responsible for monitoring their own performance and identifying training and assistance needs. While we did not explore this issue in depth, it is not clear whether schools have access to sufficient support to address persistent unexplained and unauthorised absences.

We acknowledge that addressing student attendance is a shared responsibility starting with parents, but also involving the community, the individual school, and the Department. It is also clear that solutions to a complex issue such as student attendance are not simple. The multifaceted nature of unexplained and unauthorised absences make it challenging to achieve progress. To meet this challenge, schools need guidance from the Department on effective interventions for persistent unexplained or unauthorised absences. To achieve

---

<sup>1</sup> Office of the Auditor General, *Every Day Counts: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2009, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Auditor General, *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2015, p. 12.

this, the Department needs to evaluate student attendance strategies regularly and consistently.

Unfortunately, we found gaps in the Department's evaluation of student attendance initiatives. The Department has no plans to evaluate major attendance initiatives, such as Responsible Parenting Agreements. In addition, the Department's evaluation of the Student Attendance Toolkit did not determine its reach and usefulness across all schools with attendance issues. In future, regular evaluation is needed to ensure the Department, Parliament, and the public can understand what works and what does not work to address student attendance.

We have found that the Department does not make best use of its annual report to provide transparent information on student attendance. Annual reporting is an opportunity for the Department to demonstrate its accountability for student attendance performance. This includes being transparent about the scale of the issue and variability in school and region performance. Yet the Department does not report key information. The Department reports the percentage of students in each category of educational risk due to non-attendance, but does not report the number. Nor does the Department report progress at the school level or student attendance by region.

We have been pleased to note the Department's efforts to provide schools with data, tools, resources and guidance to manage student attendance. Nevertheless, we have identified opportunities for the Department to improve processes to ensure that schools are in a better position to manage persistent student absence.