

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

FOLLOW-UP OF AGENCY IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 8 AUGUST 2012**

Members

Mr J.C. Kobelke (Chairman)
Mr J.M. Francis (Deputy Chairman)
Mr A. Krsticevic
Mr C.J. Tallentire
Ms R. Saffioti

Hearing commenced at 10.06 am

O'NEILL, MS SHARYN

Director General, Department of Education examined:

AXWORTHY, MR DAVID

Deputy Director General, Schools, Department of Education, examined:

DODSON, MR ALAN

Director, Education, Department of Education, examined:

CLERY, MR MARTIN

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

The CHAIRMAN: I will go through the necessary and hopefully brief formalities. I welcome you and thank you for your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee as it considers the Department of Education's implementation of the recommendation from the Auditor General's report, "Every Day Counts: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools".

The Public Accounts Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. This hearing is a formal procedure of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any document or documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record.

Before we proceed with the questions we have today, I need to ask a series of questions. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form today?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to being witnesses at today's hearing?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: I am pleased to pass over to Ms Saffioti to lead off with some questions.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Thank you. I will ask some questions and my colleagues will also jump in to ask questions throughout the morning.

First of all, I will start off with the progress of attendance levels over the past number of years since the Auditor General's report. In your response that you sent in March 2012, which we received in March 2012, it was noted that attendance levels have not really improved over recent years. They have stabilised and even fallen slightly in some areas. Do you have any views as to why there has been no improvement in attendance levels in our schools?

Ms O'Neill: It is right that between 2007 and 2011, and into 2012, it is fair to describe attendance rates as stable. There have been some ups and downs—probably not statistically significant—but it would be reasonable to say that it is stable. That is obviously a continuing cause for concern for us. We would like the attendance rates to be higher. We know that students need to attend around 90 per cent of the time to maintain a consistent and ongoing educational program that builds piece by piece on top of each other. In terms of why that is the case, I guess the why is no different to what the why has been forever. I think there have been different takes on that over recent periods. The attendance of children at school is centrally a responsibility of parents. Schools play an incredibly important role and do extraordinary things, in my view, to ensure children arrive. I was speaking to one of our senior people yesterday who is in Meekatharra. I was reminded of the extent to which schools go to have students attend. The bus had gone out twice already to pick up children around town. They had gone into some of the children's homes to talk to parents to try to encourage them to get their kids out of bed. Many times in my career I have seen, as have my colleagues, schools that feed the children breakfast and lunch and, very often, feed them after school. The other day students in Meekatharra were being clothed, they were cleaning their teeth and having breakfast. A whole range of services was provided. Essentially, attendance is a partnership—it has to be. Any solution has to be a partnership between the school, the parents and the broader community. We have seen some terrific responses from parents and communities more recently. For example, some businesses have come on board and refused to serve children during the school day and are being supportive in that way. Parents also too—I make a point of note that the number of unauthorised absences has decreased significantly over the past few years, whereas previously a range of children were absent and their parents were not telling us the reason for that. People often get confused between absenteeism and truancy, of course. Right now there are lots of kids away because of the flu and other symptoms. Part of the strategy that we put in place had a very strong focus on the publication and promotion and working with the community and parents about the importance of schooling. The first point I make is that it is a mutual obligation; in fact, the obligation is on parents while our obligation is to ensure that children want to be there and that when they are there they are well schooled. There continues to be in some components of the community—we are no different to any other state—an apathy about students attending school. In terms of pointing to the major concerns around absenteeism or attendance, one would be community apathy. That is why a fair degree of the strategy that we have in place involves talking to parents and students and focus groups with young people et cetera. That is an important component.

One of the newer emerging concerns, which was debated a little bit last year, involves fly in, fly out workers. There is a whole discussion about fly in, fly out workers and how that relates to families being together and doing things together. It is not my place to provide commentary about that today, but anecdotally—because we have not seen hard evidence of this, although perhaps we might soon in the figures—schools report that children of fly in, fly out workers take, during the school term, two weeks here, one week there, to be home with the family when the family is combined, to go away on holiday or to do regular things that they normally do not do with the parent who is usually away. We are seeing some of that. Again—this is anecdotal because it is very hard for us to get data around this—schools refer to lower overseas airfares, particularly to Indonesia and other places, and to the fact that the low seasons occur during school terms, so students go on holidays. That has ever been thus; I do not want to pretend that it has not. The reality is that when parents have long-service leave, which is not very often, they might decide to go around Australia and to take leave. I think

what we are seeing is an increase in the short two weeks here, one week there for the purposes of holidaying which, of course, is not allowed for under the act.

[10.15 am]

We have the increase in the school leaving age. People should be mindful of the fact that the leaving age was raised to 16 in 2006 and to 17 in 2008. When the policy was put in place, there was an assumption at the time—I was involved—that because they were now able to stay in school, go into training, employment and apprenticeships, more students would take up some of the other options of going into training or into an apprenticeship and perhaps out of that cohort, who historically would not stay at school, would not choose to come to school when they were compelled and that they would take the other options. In fact, that has not necessarily been the case. More students have stayed at school than originally was modelled or considered or assumed to be the fact. Students who ordinarily in the old days would not stay at school are now staying at school. I am not suggesting that they should not—of course, they should be and we are happy that they are—but ordinarily many years ago, such students would not have chosen to stay at school. Parents often say—again this is anecdotal—they prefer their children to be at school if they have to be somewhere, because they know where they are all day, whereas TAFE is part-time and they might not be able to get work. Sometimes the combination does not work for some low SES families. That is a handful of reasons why we have seen not so much a stabilisation, because on one hand we should be a little—satisfied is not the word—encouraged that we have stabilised what seemed to be in five years previous the beginning of a decline. But certainly there are a handful of reasons as to why we still see attendance as a challenge. Aboriginal student attendance is still a greater challenge on balance. There are a myriad of reasons why that is the case. Our strategy, in part, also included interviewing young people about why they were not engaging. A piece of research was done around that. It was quite interesting. The commentary is quite enlightening. Some of them do not want to be at school. Why is that? Because they do not feel it suits their aspirations, even though they do not necessarily aspire to something in particular. While they do not want to be at school, they have other options but they do not take up those options. They report the relative competition—those are my words—between what is on offer in the community, what is exciting in the community, the social networking, they are much more mobile—they live in Rockingham, they are in the city—so the capacity to get around and socialise, activities in the community that they are much more interested in. Some of them are young parents, some are not living at home so there is another cohort who have very different lives. It was quite interesting to listen to their stories about why they would and would not be in school. That is a handful of reasons as to why the challenge continues. It is not different here than it is in other states; but, nonetheless, it is still an enormous challenge for us.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Thank you. We might go through some of the issues you raised in a bit more detail later. I want to go through some of the figures to try to get a comprehensive view.

In 2008 the Auditor General reported that on any given day 15 500 students were away from school, which is about 8.7 per cent. Of course, that includes both authorised and unauthorised absences. What is today's figure? That is, how many students do not attend school on any given day?

Ms O'Neill: We do not have that detail right now.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Can you provide it by way of supplementary information?

Ms O'Neill: Sure.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Another aspect of the Auditor General's report was students' educational risk. As you said, over 90 per cent indicates regular attendance. I think the department has indicated that any student whose attendance is under 90 per cent is at some level of risk—either indicated risk, moderate risk or severe risk. Do you have the breakdown of how many children currently are categorised “at risk” because their attendance is less than 90 per cent?

Ms O'Neill: At this stage I will use semester one 2011, because semester one 2012 is just being finalised. The first category, which is regular, is 71.12 per cent of students.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: So that is down from 72.4 per cent in the Auditor General's report.

Ms O'Neill: Yes, that would be the comparison. I would have to look at the time period in the Auditor General's report.

Mr Dodson: Sorry, Sharyn, can I just interrupt? From my understanding of the Auditor General's report—it is only a recent understanding—because of the change in the leaving age, it used figures from year 1 to year 10. All our published figures these days go to year 12 because we are able to. I think we need to be cautious that we make comparisons on the same basis. I would prefer to do those figures on notice.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Just give me those figures today and I will not make that comparison.

Ms O'Neill: I will run through the figures and then, if you would like a comparison, we can deal with that out of this session.

The next group is indicated risk.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: That is 80 per cent to 89 per cent attendance—is that right?

Mr Dodson: That is correct.

Ms O'Neill: It is 17.51 per cent. The moderate at risk is 7.1 per cent and the last one is 3.41 per cent.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: How many children does the 3.4 per cent represent?

Ms O'Neill: The 3.41 per cent, I understand, represents 7 125.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: They are children whose attendance is below 59 per cent. So there are 7 125 children whose attendance is less than 59 per cent.

Mr Dodson: Less than 60 per cent. It could be 59.8 as well.

Ms O'Neill: That is in 2011. And those are public school figures.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: It has been noted that attendance levels drop off in years 11 and 12. Do you have a breakdown of attendance levels for years 11 and 12?

Mr Dodson: The rate in 2011 was 86.29.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: That is attendance, not regular attendance.

Mr Dodson: This is based on a straight attendance rate. For year 12, it is 88.53. Did you want the comparative figures for 2008?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Sorry—so it is 86.29 in 2011?

Mr Dodson: Yes, for year 11. And it is 88.53 for year 12 in 2011.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: That is a snapshot. And the comparable figures?

Mr Dodson: The 2008 figures were 87.30 and 88.95.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: So there has not been a significant drop in those years.

Mr Dodson: "Stabilised" is the best word we can come up with today.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: They were the key figures I was after.

In relation to the programs that existed, the Auditor General noted that programs were being delivered at the district office level. So schools, the district office and the central office had a role in managing attendance of any given day. With the recording of attendance, is there a computer system that teachers, principals and schools can log into every day that records unauthorised and authorised attendances on a daily basis?

Mr Dodson: Initially it is unauthorised unless they have been pre-warned, and then they have to investigate the reason for the absence thereafter.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: And then it might be changed to authorised.

Mr Dodson: And then they change it, yes.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Who monitors that on a daily basis? For example, is that information captured by the school and monitored by central office or the regional office. Who monitors that on a daily basis?

Ms O'Neill: It is not monitored by the region or district office.

Mr Dodson: On a daily basis?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Yes.

Mr Dodson: The school.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: When does it become apparent that there are children at risk? When is it flagged there are children who are not attending and that there are children attending less than 60 per cent or 59 per cent?

Ms O'Neill: When does that become apparent?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Yes. For example, when it is it flagged that these particular children are not attending school and are at risk?

Mr Dodson: The school has a number of reports available to it from its school information system. It can be monitoring these things and it should be monitoring these things obviously on a regular basis. It can write a report so the schools can ask for a report that tells them about students who are falling below things. A new initiative was the introduction of a watch list, which is kind of like a pre-warning situation because after so many absences it is clear that a student is in that zone. The system informs the school that this is an issue and that it needs to get onto it immediately.

Ms O'Neill: After 15 days of absence, they are listed as children whose whereabouts are unknown. There are points of intersection. The introduction of the watch list is to ensure that it is not just allowed to roll on and on.

Mr Dodson: Especially for the ones who take a day here and a day there, as opposed to a block, which is more evident to schools.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: When there are 15 days of unauthorised absence, then it becomes whereabouts unknown.

Mr Axworthy: It is followed up, first of all. They only become whereabouts unknown if we cannot track the parents down. Certainly what schools do—and all schools do this, but they might have different arrangements—usually involves the class teacher in the first instance. In a high school there may be a year coordinator who would chase up a student's absences. Many schools now—something like 200 or 300—operate an SMS system. As soon as a student is not present, an SMS message goes directly to the parents' mobile phone.

Ms O'Neill: That usually happens by about 9.30 in the morning when all the data is in. When my son was sick, I forgot to ring the school. I received an SMS message asking me to contact the school. That level of regulation or monitoring with the SMS—or if schools do not use the SMS system they ring to contact parents—and the watch list have added rigor around ensuring that students do not—As Alan said, the long-term absence is much more noticeable than a day here, the Monday, and then the Friday and the following Tuesday—the irregular pattern.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Axworthy, you referred to following up. Can you step through what “follow up” means? You mentioned the first step, which is an SMS or a phone call. What follows on from that?

Mr Axworthy: Primary schools are a bit different from the large secondary schools. In a primary school the roll is taken twice a day—first thing in the morning and first thing after lunch. In a secondary school the roll is taken at every period change. Obviously, if it is a double period the students stay for two periods. As soon as there is a period change, the roll is recorded lesson by lesson. As soon as there is an absence, many schools use an SMS message system, while other schools have a phone messaging system. It is pretty much the same thing; an automated message gets back to the parents. For those who respond to the SMS and say, “Oh, sorry, he’s got a cold. I expect he won’t be back until two days hence”, it is recorded. Where there is no contact or contact that says he will back tomorrow, but he does not turn up the next day, the school—each school organises it slightly differently—will have another attempt to make contact either through SMSing or phoning. Usually that occurs three or four times to try to elicit a response from a parent that there is a legitimate reason. Following on from that, often a year coordinator or a deputy in a high school may drop in at the student’s house and knock on the door and ask why the child has not been at school for three days, or why the parent has not been answering SMS messages.

[10.30 am]

If, on doing that, they get to the house and there is no-one there and the neighbour says, “Oh, no, they’ve gone; we don’t know,” and if we are unable to track a child after 15 days, we then list the child as “Whereabouts unknown”. The whereabouts unknown list is a list that is shared with other government agencies that may have contact with families—the Department for Child Protection, WA Police, juvenile justice authorities, the Department of Health, Catholic education and the independent schools to say, “Do any of you know?” and of course with all other government schools, in case the child or the parents have moved house and forgotten to tell people where they have gone. As a result, that whereabouts unknown list gets bigger and then falls down. As we find children, children go on, children come off that list.

Ms O’Neill: There is for schools an attendance intervention flowchart, so we provide them with guidance around the steps that ought to be taken in order to get to—for example, if we ever have to, and we have had to—attendance panels or, in fact prosecution, we need the fully documented steps that would take us through, and so we provide guidance to schools about the expectations and the interventions that ought to happen along the way.

The CHAIRMAN: Could I come back, Mr Axworthy, to something you said in terms of the follow-up by a year coordinator or teacher who would actually try to locate the parents and, if phoning fails, visit them. Do you have any statistics on how often an officer from a school, whether it is the participation officer or some other officer, actually does go out and call on people?

Mr Axworthy: We do not collect that centrally, but schools would have that information.

The CHAIRMAN: The point of the question is that I realise how busy our teachers are and how many priorities they have and I personally cannot imagine too many teachers or year coordinators—a year coordinator in a high school might have 10 or 15 students who are showing up as not regular attenders and I find it hard to think that they would have the resources to go out and knock on doors when you might need several visits for one student to actually locate them. What resources are there so that a meaningful follow-up can actually take place?

Mr Clery: The regional officers have structures in place to support the schools in those circumstances as well. For example, I know that the south metropolitan regional office has school psychologist time; they have an attendance officer that is appointed. They also have some other support where they monitor very closely the attendance rates in the schools in their region and they actually support the schools that are most at risk and need the greatest level of support to do that type of individualised follow-up and also plan interventions and individual plans for students that are identified at risk.

The CHAIRMAN: I appreciate that you have developed policies, plans, flow charts and procedures. What I am looking for is some hard evidence of how much rubber is hitting the road, actually going out and following up on these children, because my experience and the information I have is very, very little, so I am looking for some hard data in terms of what resources go into—from the education department, as opposed to the police who, at various times, have had plans to put their officers out chasing up these kids. What I am asking is: what resources are clearly identified in the education department to be out there, contacting parents of children who are hard to locate in terms of really following them up?

Ms O'Neill: What we do not have is an overall centralised figure of how many school visitations occurred. We do not collect that centrally and I think what people are trying to refer to, and I will try to get something more concrete for you, is that schools do have resources. We put in \$50 million annually to schools for additional support funding to schools for things like literacy, numeracy, behaviour and attendance—whatever the priority of the school —

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Just on that funding, it is \$50 million. As I understand it, there is no dedicated funding for truancy or participation officers but there is a global allocation for six or seven items—is that right?

Ms O'Neill: You are right. There is support money that goes to schools—\$50 million—and it has increased over the past couple of years, which schools can use for whatever the priority in their school is, so schools have the capacity to use that flexibly. If attendance is the issue in their school, they can use it for that purpose. There are dedicated moneys for participation, but participation and attendance measures are slightly different things. On top of that, as part of Better Attendance, Brighter Futures, funding was given to schools. In the first instance there were 40 schools that received more than \$1 million in grants; there were Aboriginal attendance grants that went to schools as well, so there has been an additional injection in terms of that funding and then post that, another nearly \$400 000 went in, in relation to rewards for schools where they are able to achieve some results. On top of that, we are funding to the tune of nearly \$600 000 a tri-border attendance strategy. Internationally, we just won a silver award in Canada for that work. I do not think it is reasonable to suggest that there are no resources going into schools for attendance; there certainly is funding going into schools and there are a range of opportunities for schools to use their resources more flexibly; they used to be more hard tied, and you are right, they could not use the resources for attendance, whereas now, if that school's issue is attendance—and every school has to be attentive to attendance—they have the capacity to use the resources for that purpose. They are supported through the regional office; we have put the sights out further into schools and into groups of schools. We have additional resources in schools to assist with this. To go back to my original commentary, though—you are quite right, teachers are incredibly busy. I think you are right to suggest that they are not out on the streets chasing kids down every minute of the day. We have never had a situation where we can do that, because you have to be able to find them and you have to be able to go into the homes. Sometimes that can be challenging for any person—teacher, police or not. We now have a new partnership with the police where they are approaching young people on the street who do not have a leave pass, and returning them to schools more directly, so we are working now in a much stronger partnership with police around that. I think it is reasonable to suggest, in fact, that there are resources for schools. Is there enough? Given that attendance is such a difficult nut to crack, we would always welcome more, but there are resources being put into schools, they do have greater flexibility, more flexibility than they have ever had before. We have independent public schools that interestingly, their attendance has increased slightly, although it is early days. They have full flexibility not only over their funding but their staffing, and some of them have used in their profile to have a focus on attendance through year coordinators or other mechanisms.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: In relation to the supports, regional offices, the example was given, south metro has one attendance officer—is that right?

Mr Axworthy: No, they have one person who has a designated title of—because each region, we ask for a designated person so that information on whereabouts unknown or prosecutions flows through that officer. South metropolitan have a number of officers that they have placed, or positions that they have placed, in the schools that have the biggest priority need in this area, but there is one person who is designated as the attendance officer.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: How many schools would south metro be looking after?

Mr Axworthy: Approximately 220 schools.

Ms O'Neill: This question was also asked around this issue in estimates and we have talked about it a couple of times. I think it is important to clarify that the one person is not managing attendance for the south metropolitan region. Every school, every teacher manages attendance, and every student services team manages attendance. This person, essentially, is looking after the data for that area and maintaining a register, so we are not suggesting that one person could possibly manage the total; they could not.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: So, for example, for the 7 125 children at high educational risk, what action is currently being undertaken to try to—I understand it is a very complex problem; I do not think it is an easy problem and I do not think one teacher or one school can fix it, frankly. But I do think it needs better coordination with NGOs, other sectors of government and a more holistic approach to ensure that these kids at risk are actually going to school. What I want to find out is: is there a sort of complex system out there? Are the regional offices, the central office, are the schools, working with NGOs, working with other sectors of government? I am not talking about police picking them up and dropping them off at the school, because to me that is not a solution; I do not think that is a solution at all. I am talking about working with other agencies and NGOs to ensure that we identify these kids and actually get them back onto some sort of path.

Ms O'Neill: I think you can take from my comments earlier on that that is an absolutely critical part of the whole picture here—that we cannot do it on our own, and I think NGOs and our partnerships with them are fantastic and they do great work in their part of this whole challenge. Yes, schools are working, increasingly so, and I think we are getting better at it, but there are many examples of schools working in close partnership; I take Roseworth Primary School, for example. For those who are familiar, Roseworth has the Smith Family working very closely actually inside the school; not only alongside the school, but inside the school. We have Clontarf academies; we have Foodbank that we are terrific partners with around the whole breakfast program across hundreds of schools. There are many examples, school by school. Some groups of schools use the same person or the same NGO, so I think it is a newer focus, probably, over the past five or six years. Schools have always worked with them, but I think there are greater partnerships coming through than we have seen before. It works really well, particularly where the NGOs have existing relationships with families. That is the time, I think, when the partnership is at its strongest because the school and home are, for some of those families, a long way apart, and they are very often able to assist us to bridge the gap because they have an existing relationship with those people and those families. I think we can confidently say that there are lots of examples, and we can provide you with many —

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: I know there are individual examples, but system-wide, the issue is what support is given to schools to establish those relationships. I think we have some graphs showing where some schools' attendances have decreased dramatically —

Ms O'Neill: Just to answer that last comment, I think it is simplistic to suggest that you can have a system-sized solution to an issue like attendance that is highly differentiated, community to community. When I go to Burringurrah or, indeed, Kalumburu, where they have issues at the moment, to suggest that a solution that is suitable there is going to work in other places where we have attendance issues, particularly in Rockingham and the like, we have found that not to be the best approach. We believe we need highly differentiated approaches. That means that we can establish high-level agreements with NGOs that can be differentiated at the local level, and that is

what we are investigating as we speak; otherwise, we have schools having to go through the process of procurement or work with an NGO and the administration of that, that we can actually assist with, so we are endeavouring to do that work right now where we can get high-level agreements with NGOs that then can be negotiated on the ground.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: I just have a couple of quick questions, the first one being: do you have a comparison within the metropolitan area of unauthorised absences between private and public schools, and/or a comparison as to whether there is any difference in terms of —

Ms O'Neill: We do not collect the absentee or attendance data for non-government schools.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: I just wonder whether that is an exercise worth doing. I am just wondering whether there is a base level of unauthorised absences that will always be there, irrespective of what you are doing. In terms of, for example —

Ms O'Neill: We do not have the data between government and non-government, but I think that most people would report that you would get more unauthorised absences in lower socioeconomic areas.

[10.45 am]

The CHAIRMAN: The Auditor General's report had a graph on that.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: You talked about the fact that some kids do not want to be there. I suppose their parents send them there almost to be looked after. Is there some way of recording their level of unauthorised absence in the statistics and also highlighting the fact that they are in that category so they are much more difficult to manage or maybe impossible to manage?

Ms O'Neill: It is a good point. People get very confused between attendance and truancy. There is a much smaller group that makes up that truanting group. Truancy is about continual refusal to attend school. Sometimes their parents try to get them there. It is not always the case that parents are not supportive. The students get dropped off and then go. It is complex. Sometimes it is the parents' apathy; sometimes the students have just decided and refused to go to school. Even when you look at that 7 125 at risk severe, some of those students will not be attending because they are long term ill. A lot of assumptions are made about data. We always caution people to not make simplistic judgements around the data. You are quite right; to be able to break it down in a different way might be useful but we do not collect non-government data.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: With regard to Indigenous truancy and the unauthorised absences, do you look at the fact that there may be cultural events of significance going on at any particular time, a death in the community or something along those lines so even though it is not authorised, one could tick the box and say it is incorrectly authorised?

Ms O'Neill: It is a very good question. We have introduced new categories in our attendance recording to be respectful of that. We can be proactive. Many of our schools are starting to do this, particularly out in the Ngaanyatjarra lands, for example. We try to talk to the lands council. If they know there is an upcoming event, we can plan and be aware ahead of time. There is something about having the knowledge that it is a cultural event, and we do not always get that from the community. We might find out later. That is helpful. Some other cultural groups have periods of time during the year when kids cannot be there on the day. It is just trying to work out with those communities the best way for us to be able to respect those cultural events. In the lands, for example, if we know that everyone is going off to the next location, sometimes our teachers move with them. It is about trying to be flexible around that. We can only do that when we have a good partnership, good dialogue and a good relationship with the community. We have, for example, Aboriginal education officers who would be embedded in the community and would be able to help us with that.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: Do you record those as authorised absences if you know it is happening?

Mr Axworthy: We code those as “for cultural reasons”. There is a separate coding. We would regard those as an authorised absence. Nevertheless, in our statistics of attendance, it would be a non-attendance.

Ms O’Neill: Sometimes these things become confused. There might be, for example, a funeral and then the kids stay for another four weeks because they cannot get back. The funeral is authorised but the further four weeks might not be. It is trying to unpick some of that detail, which is quite complex, particularly if the parents are not around or the care givers. It is not always clear who is giving the authority.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: You talked about parents taking their kids out of school to go on holidays while there were cheaper airfares et cetera. If that is a seasonal trend—I do not know how big that factor is—do you look at adjusting school terms to accommodate lifestyle changes, possibly, for community preferences?

Ms O’Neill: It is difficult because it is so specific to individuals. I do not think education should organise terms around cheap flights.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: Not just cheap flights. There may be a particular event or something that happens and lots of people disappear.

Ms O’Neill: Of course. The dates are gazetted some years out. If we knew that everyone was going to be off for something in particular, we would do that. For example, in country locations, the Dowerin field days have been held forever and ever and ever. It is important to the community. Schools have the authority to close for that day and they make the day up another time, perhaps on Easter Tuesday. There is some flexibility. I did not mean to be flippant but those suggestions have been made to us around changing our calendar for people’s personal interests. As you can imagine, with 250 000 students, families all want to do different things.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: I would not think of it for individual circumstances, only if there is something significant or you know that an event happens every year.

Ms O’Neill: For example, in New South Wales when the Sydney Olympics were on, they changed the term dates because no-one was going to be around.

Mr Axworthy: Sharyn mentioned the tri-state arrangements. It is important. While the students who live in the remote areas are rather small in number and they probably do not weigh heavily in terms of the state’s statistic, the attendance of those students is one group that has been particularly problematic for us. That is because traditionally we record attendance as “you have enrolled in this school and we record how many times you attend this school”. In the remote areas a number of families are quite transient and move from community to community. In the past we have just ended up with statistics that show some of these students only attend their enrolled school 20 per cent of the time. Anecdotally, we knew that sometimes they had moved from one community to another. They have actually turned up at other schools. We introduced a program in conjunction with the Northern Territory and Queensland—it is a WA development—called the tri-state initiative.

Ms O’Neill: South Australia initiative.

Mr Axworthy: Sorry, South Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: It is a long walk to Queensland.

Mr Axworthy: Yes, it is a long walk to Queensland. We have been trying to sell it to Queensland. Basically, it is a methodology across government schools and non-government schools in those three states of being able to track students as they move around. Our longer term aim is then to be able to provide an educational program that follows the child as they move around. I will give one of the statistics that come out of that. Between February 2009 and December 2011, 2 270 students attended three schools, 552 students attended four different schools over that period, 121 attended

five schools, 21 were at six schools and, to cut to the chase, one student was in nine different schools over that period. As I say, in trying to track children like that so we can provide the education program that runs around, that is not to say that there would be a larger number of kids who had moved from town to town but did not attend another school. Some do and some do not. We are attempting to get the education program to follow the children in those cases.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Director General, you mentioned the partnership with businesses and businesses not wanting to sell food. I imagine we are talking about deli owners and people like that. I am hearing from business owners in my electorate that they would like to be able to report where they see kids coming in consistently during school hours. They believe that there should be a person in the district office that they can phone but it seems there is not the resourcing, there is not somebody who can deal with their complaint.

Ms O'Neill: If there are businesses in your area who want the name of the person they should call, we can give it to them. There is always someone they can call. We can provide them with a name and a contact point. We would welcome the support of local businesses. Not all local businesses are on board. With the ones that are, it really assists schools to minimise the gathering places and the attractiveness of not being at school. By law, they should be in school and it becomes an issue for the police and for the business owners themselves. We have really enjoyed their support. In the couple of examples I can think of down in Fremantle, the schools were much appreciative of the stand that the local business owners took around that. We would be very happy if a group of business owners would assist us in that way, and we would be happy to provide them with a contact point.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Do you think that potential contact is promoted enough? I do not know why my deli owners are having such a hard time getting in touch with the department and finding this person.

Ms O'Neill: I am not sure why they are having that trouble. There is the regional office. They can just call the school or they can call central office. If people are having trouble knowing that, we would be very happy to make the relevant contact. My experience is that it is mostly secondary schools. It seems to be less of an issue in primary schools. The secondary kids seem to congregate around shops. Our secondary schools are working pretty hard with local businesses and communities to talk to them and provide them with that contact. We can certainly talk to them and suggest that they be more proactive in that regard. We would be very happy to do that.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Director General, I apologise if this issue was raised before I arrived. I do not think it was. I wanted to touch on some of the carrots that get kids to go to school. A couple of years ago I was up in Oombulgurri. They had a program where they provided both breakfast and lunch for kids. It was phenomenally successful because obviously we are dealing with some fairly disadvantaged communities and families. It is unfortunate that their parents either could not afford or would not provide kids with what is required to sustain them during the day. Even the kids who would have otherwise gone to school without breakfast were paying more attention and were far more focused in their school work. Having said that, clearly, it works. What programs does the department have for some of these communities to ensure that kids are given a basic meal in the morning, such as breakfast to get them to school?

Ms O'Neill: I mentioned earlier that we have a partnership arrangement—a contract, in fact—with Foodbank so that schools are supplied with food. I did not bring that detail today, not thinking that we would get there, but we can provide a briefing around Foodbank. Hundreds of schools are involved in exactly what you are talking about.

Mr Axworthy: Not just in remote communities.

Ms O'Neill: It occurs in the city. I was at Calista in the southern metropolitan area recently and there were kids all having breakfast. It is an interesting thing. It works very well in most places. It

does take a bit of work around the stigma that can be associated with breakfast. I think our schools have done a magnificent job. They make it available for all kids and they make it a social thing, so it is not just the kids who are “poor” who are seen to be going into the room to have breakfast. They provide not only breakfast, but we also wash clothes. You will go into any of our low SES schools and see that they have laundry facilities. There are lunches. We encourage the children themselves to be involved in making breakfast and lunch, not just for them to be provided with it because there are life skills there that need to be taken on. There are homework classes and food after school. It is a basic need. There is always a debate about whether schools should be in this space, at all in fact. I am entirely over that debate. There are needy children who come to school, and some of them who do not come to school. If this assists in any way, and it does, we will be involved. Foodbank is only one of the providers but we have a very large, extensive and comprehensive breakfast program. We pick kids up too. All remote communities have school cars. They pick them up, they go into the home and they bring them to school. I think teachers in Western Australia—public schools, in particular—should be recognised for the extent that they go to way beyond the ordinary remit of schools to work with families to make sure students are there. We are only one partner in that whole equation. The breakfast program has been very successful.

To go back to the point made before—it does add to workload. All of these things that people would like schools to do adds to the onus of what has to happen in schools. Only so much can get done in a school day. That is why I am very keen for teachers to be recognised in this regard. We also have parent groups in schools. The P&Cs are quite active in this space, too, in the canteens that they run, making sure that they provide for the students who come to those canteens to get fed every day of the week and the parents themselves pay for that. It is quite magnificent.

[11.00 am]

Mr Axworthy: In addition to the feeding programs Sharyn mentioned earlier, there are a number of programs linked to sporting events; the most notorious, I suppose, is the Clontarf boys football academy program. But there are equally netball programs and basketball programs for boys and girls whereby regular attendance at school is necessary in order to maintain part of that program. A number of other things happen, certainly in the remote areas and in the communities where there are swimming pools, such as: “Don’t come to school; you can’t swim in the pool” kind of arrangement. So it is a reward and punishment, if you like, for not attending. There are numerous programs, the most highly lauded of which would probably be the passport program—a program whereby in exchange for regular attendance and doing homework and things like that regularly, children get vouchers or tokens that can be exchanged for privileges at school. There is a complex arrangement of those sorts of things whereby parents who come in and assist in the school and have a parental presence can also gain privileges that can be transferred into something at the school canteen, the school uniform shop or something like that. Those sorts of programs are quite extensive.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I guess principals are community leaders. I can think of an example in my electorate where I have Lakeland Senior High School, where Laurie Longworth has done the most amazing job at transforming that school in the past five years. What he has done there is phenomenal. He has done it around a music program.

Mr Axworthy: Yes; I saw two of those students performing.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I had Minister Collier out there. I think he was blown away by the talent there.

The CHAIRMAN: Can we come to questions; we are running out of time?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Obviously there are things other than food.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: First of all, I want to go back to some of those figures we got initially; I want to complete my little table. We went through the percentages for the children at educational risk. Can I get the actual numbers for 2011? It will take two minutes to get the rest of the numbers. There were

7 125 children at severe risk. Can I have the numbers rather than the percentage for those at moderate risk and indicated risk?

Mr Dodson: We will have to do it on notice. We have only the percentages.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: You gave me the figure for severe risk of 7 125.

Ms O'Neill: I brought that one particularly. That was clarified at estimates, so I gave that.

The CHAIRMAN: We would appreciate by way of supplementary information if you could give us the figure for semester 1, 2011, which I think you were saying was the most recently completed. You do not have semester 2, 2011?

Mr Dodson: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you give those in the same breakdown as the Auditor General's report on page 16 of their report?

Mr Dodson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: That would be most appreciated.

Ms O'Neill: Just to clarify: in the Auditor General's report it is years 1 to 10. We are providing that comparison.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you give us 1 to 10?

Ms O'Neill: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: And give us the full 12 as well?

Ms O'Neill: Yes. Rita was asking for the student numbers rather than the percentages for those categories.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Yes.

Mr Dodson: That table has both those figures in it, does it not?

Ms O'Neill: Okay.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Also, some graphs have been prepared from, I think, information tabled in the Parliament looking at some specific schools over recent years where there has been some significant deterioration in attendance figures. Matthew is distributing those. As we said, there is a significant deterioration. Can we have some sort of view or information about what the education system is doing in particular with some of these schools where there has been significant deterioration in attendance figures?

The CHAIRMAN: To clarify, these clearly were the worst on those data put forward, so we are not suggesting they reflect what might be overall trends. I think the data you have given indicates too much flatlining. But where there is a particular school with a problem I think we are seeking the response on how you help these schools. You have already indicated they have funds but the funds are at their discretion, largely. Because they are different scenarios you might want to start with the metropolitan.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Metro schools and then country schools.

The CHAIRMAN: Metro schools—Coodanup, Balga, Girrawheen and Yule Brook do not seem to be going anywhere.

Ms O'Neill: With respect, having just had this given to me now, we can only hope to make very general comments. I do not know the source of the data. With 770 schools, I would not want to mislead you so I can only make very generalised comments about what is happening here. I would not like to pretend that I know the attendance programs specifically school by school, but if we can have a quick look at it for a moment.

The CHAIRMAN: We will give you a chance to look at it. We are not asking you to comment on the individual schools. But, clearly, we can pick out more than just one or two schools where it does not look like they are going in the right direction. The issue then is: how does the education department at the regional level and at the central level come in? We have already talked about how the system is monitored through. How do you pick these up? What are you currently doing in a general sense, not necessarily for specific schools, to say, “Look, this is not good enough.” On another matter recently, you were publicly pointing out that you were asking schools that were not performing in another area that they were expected to, what was being done. Here we are looking at just non-attendance. How do you pick this up and turn it around?

Ms O’Neill: In general terms, non-attendance is not new. I think we have talked to you for some time about that. In relation to this, we have worked through a process with schools of target setting and planning. Obviously, that is in place. I think the question is: what do you do when the targets have been set and you are not performing at the level we would want? We have required all regional executive directors—I did when they were put in place only two years ago or recently—that attendance is part of their performance agreement, as it is part of principals’ performance. We consider it a discussion as part of people’s performance around attendance because it is such a significant matter. Just like—I guess you were referring to them—the schools I spoke to recently calling them to account around their attendance. That is what our regional executive directors will do, and do, with their schools that report to them. We also have with our independent public schools now an independent review undertaken by another body, not by our department. Attendance is one of the aspects they would look at in their business plan. Again, we ask them our accountability questions, which are: “What did you set out to achieve? How did you go? How did you measure that? What is the data telling you and what are you going to do about it?” Those are the accountability questions that form in any jurisdiction’s quality assurance approach. In short, what do we do? We hold the school to account. We ask them to account for their performance. We have introduced an SPMS, a school performance monitoring system, in, I think, the past two years, which is new, where we can for the first time at central office see the performance of all schools. We can then do comparisons across schools on like schools and about their performance and have discussions with schools. We also reward, I guess. All schools receive payments where they have been able to achieve great results. You need both. You need pressure and support. I guess our approach has always been to apply the pressure to the schools that are not performing well and provide support.

But the accountability is broader than just schools themselves. We have talked a bit about that. We take it incredibly seriously. It is part of a school’s overall review. When I have concerns about performance of a school, we have formed—in fact, under the previous government—the expert review team. If I have a particular concern about a school, a team of specialists goes into that school and reviews that school to provide me with very direct and clear advice. I think we went to Balcatta—for good reasons. Equally, we go into schools to have a very deep and searching look at their performance and that is made public and there are prescribed improvement plans. With those prescribed improvement plans, I think that is where we get to the point where we say, “You’ve had the resources in your control; you’ve had the strategies in your control; it has not gone as well as we wanted; we are not getting the results”, so there is a point of intervention where I have an expert team come in and say, “This is now what you have to do on the basis of best evidence, best advice.” There is support; there is support; there is pressure and then there is systemic intervention when we have needed it. As I said, at least out of the 40 AIM schools, which were our worst performing schools, what did we do? We chose the 40 worst performing schools; we made them have specific plans, specific interventions and specific resources. I think it is fair to point to the AIM schools to say 33 of the 40 schools, as I understand it, improved their results.

Mr Axworthy: Yes.

Ms O’Neill: They stabilised the results.

Mr Axworthy: Thirty-three arrested the decline because we picked them on the ones that were declining. A number of those have improved.

Ms O'Neill: That is part of the intervention.

Mr Axworthy: Six are showing. These are all AIM schools you have here. If you pick one of those—Yule Brook, on the end there—we would say there is indication that it has arrested what was a decline and is actually moving in the right direction. Interestingly, one of the statistics out of Yule Brook is that its non-attendance of females was up to 55 per cent and they have reduced that to 25 per cent now. That is largely because of a girls' academy program they have introduced along the lines of the Clontarf boys academy. We would see Yule Brook as having a way to go but at least it has arrested and is moving forward.

Ms O'Neill: I also caution the committee with my concern again with the use of this data. The title is "The Worst Non-Attendance Records" but you are using average number of unauthorised half-day absences, which is a part of a bigger story, so I caution the use of naming or referring to these schools. These schools have attendance issues; I am not pretending they do not, but you have used one selective piece of information. Nonetheless, we want to account for these schools and their performance, but just caution around the use of the data. In terms of what we do, at the end of the day, as I said, it is support, support, pressure and then the intervention, naming 40 schools that we were concerned about, and these fit into that group. They got additional resources but additional pressure to produce. Thirty-three either improved or stabilised.

Mr Axworthy: And they have to account to us by the end of this.

Ms O'Neill: We get that report by the end of this year and the expert review team goes in. No schools want to be in either of those groups. They are in enormously challenging areas with enormously challenging demographics. Nonetheless, for those children's lives to turn around they need to be at school; they need to be learning, and we accept that responsibility. Probably overall in message, what I want to say to the committee is that we have got some satisfaction out of the fact that we have arrested some of the decline, but we share the concern of the community around attendance. We would like to be doing better in this regard. We will not achieve greater results without a much more combined community effort in this regard.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I ask by way of supplementary information whether you can give us a very brief understanding of what you are doing with respect to these eight schools?

Ms O'Neill: Sure.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of the programs and how it all works, one of the key things that has come through to me, Ms O'Neill, is that you really are devolving a lot of this to the local level and I can see benefits in that. But if it is not actually on target, as you have already mentioned, you have centralised systems with further support intervention and assessment. All I am asking for is not a blow by blow on each school, but, say, this school has been designated in terms of your central issue, or has not. If it has been designated, then this is the general process that has been pursued with this particular school. Can we have that brief overview for those eight schools as supplementary information?

Ms O'Neill: Sure. I can tell you off the top of my head that the expert review team has been into Roebourne, Carnarvon, Balga and —

Mr Axworthy: Meekatharra.

Ms O'Neill: And possibly Coodanup. We will give you that overview.

The CHAIRMAN: The ERG has been there and on what date and whether it is completed or underway.

Ms O'Neill: The other point I would make in relation to the comments you just made now that we are devolving with our model of giving responsibility at the local level, while we are getting greater flexibility at the local level, the accountability has increased. I would not want you to be left with the impression that it has been left to people on the ground to do their own thing. That is not the case.

[11.15 am]

The CHAIRMAN: I am keen to get the centralised follow-up when clearly there is an issue where additional support or encouragement is required.

Ms O'Neill: We are happy to do that.

The CHAIRMAN: I have one more question, but I will leave it open for other members who have a question.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: I am looking in particular at attendance levels for years 11 and 12. There was a participation directorate that I understand was abolished a number of years ago.

Mr Axworthy: It is still there.

Ms O'Neill: I am sorry, no. I do not think it is called a directorate. It is a branch, but the numbers are reduced.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: From what to what?

Ms O'Neill: When the announcement was made the number was around 100 and it is down to 49. That has been the case for a couple of years.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Was that in about 2009 that it was reduced to 49?

Ms O'Neill: Yes, I think it was a couple of years ago.

The CHAIRMAN: For the record, could we have a brief understanding of what that unit or directorate was about and what they hoped to achieved and what they are now seeking to achieve?

Ms O'Neill: Perhaps I can clarify that the outcomes of that directorate are no different today than they were at its inception, and I think we talked about this in the estimates hearing. The differentiation in resourcing was that in the beginning around 10 000 notices of arrangement had to be sorted. If you remember, we were starting from nothing and going into a new system called notices of arrangement and if someone was going into employment, training or an apprenticeship they had to be put on a notice of arrangement, which was a new legislative requirement. We had 100 people because it was all new and there was this entire group that had to be accounted for, whereas all of that administration has been done. Now we have 49 and they maintain the system, and we find that to be manageable. We can give the committee an overview of that as supplementary information.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: That would be great. I understand there was dedicated participation funding to schools to ensure that year 11 and 12 students were in an approved course of study, TAFE or work.

Ms O'Neill: It is an approved program.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Is there still dedicated funding and is that funding to schools ring-fenced to ensure that?

Mr Clery: It is the same amount.

Ms O'Neill: It has been added to that supplementation money that we talked about before, but in addition to that is the education training participation program money, which was also part of that original policy and which is still available. So there is more than one funding source for this for schools.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Basically, the funding has been pooled and given to principals and it is up to them whether they dedicate that to participation programs or not.

Ms O'Neill: The funding has not been pooled. The funding was always with principals. Before there were 15 separate pieces of money that went to schools. That has been brought together. Schools have always had some flexibility over their funding, but schools do have greater decision making over how to use that funding.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: So it has not been pooled, but it has been brought together?

Ms O'Neill: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: For the sake of our record, you referred to \$50 million and used the acronym SSPRA. Could we have that in full?

Ms O'Neill: Yes; it is school support program resource allocation.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: So funding was earmarked for particular programs, but when were they brought together?

Ms O'Neill: I think three years ago.

Mr Clery: Funding for senior school engagement went into SSPRA for last year.

Ms O'Neill: The bringing together of funds happened about three years ago. This component was put in just last year.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Do you have any indication whether principals are actually spending that money on participation programs? For example, do you collect any evidence or data to show how that money has been spent?

Ms O'Neill: I do not think we have any centralised data that they are spending it specifically in participation, but by the same token I have had no reports from schools that they are not, because most schools are maintaining the same programs that they had. We hear pretty quickly if there is any diminution of programs, and I have had no suggestion made to me that there is a reduction of programs, other than when schools choose to change their programs and use the funding. In fact, it is quite the opposite. We have schools using funds flexibly from a range of areas to bring it together around participation. For example, most of the kids who have difficulty around participation also have difficulty around literacy and numeracy. Previously, they had to use each bucket separately. Now, schools can put together much more robust programs; for example, the one that Joe Francis referred to at Lakelands around digital music. I have seen that program and it is terrific. They would not be able to do that if the amount of money they had for participation was separated. I think that schools are doing a very good job to direct their resources to their priorities. We used to have silly situations in the past in which people had to create literacy and numeracy programs and this program separately. We are seeing much more sophisticated programs on the basis that they can use their money more flexibly. I have not had reported to me on any occasion—not even one occasion—that a school is having trouble in participation because their money has been given to them flexibly.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: I am not asking that. Centrally, you do not collect any data or evidence to show where that money is being spent. I understand the SSPRA money is given as a one-line budget.

Ms O'Neill: We would not call it a one-line budget; it is more untied than previous allocations. A one-line budget is staffing and everything.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: No, I am sorry; I meant a one-line budget for SSPRA.

Ms O'Neill: Yes, as one allocation.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: I understand it is a one-line budget with a list of things it could be spent on, but centrally you would have no indication of where that money is being spent.

Ms O'Neill: We have not to date had the need to have them report back line by line, which was what they had to do in the past, for no real benefit.

Mr Axworthy: Every school has to have a budget that is displayed, that is signed off by the school community and that is registered and available online publicly for people to look at. The expenditure of any school is a public accounts document.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: So you have had no complaints or heard about no issues related to whether schools are spending sufficiently on participation programs such as youth workers, school psychologists and things like that?

Ms O'Neill: No, because they do not complain about their own decisions. The decisions are in their hands and they believe they are making the right decisions.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: I do not expect the principals to complain, but you have had no other complaints?

Ms O'Neill: I have had no other complaints given to me from a parent, student or community member that they believe a school has not used resources appropriately for that purpose.

The CHAIRMAN: I have one final question before the brief formalities to close off. The Auditor General's report was dated August 2009, which is three years ago. Clearly you have taken on board this report, and I appreciate and thank you for that. One of the areas you looked at was your program to try to change attitudes about kids going to school. In the material you provided to us, you indicated there had been some assessment of the success of that. My question goes to attendance, truancy and the whole picture. Given you have taken up many things, or most of what the Auditor General raised with you, including putting in place programs and reassessing your structures, have you now gone back and done any assessment as to whether the new structures and policies are delivering; and, if not as yet, is that something that you will be doing to see whether or not the changes you have made are delivering effectively what you are seeking, which is improved attendance and school outcomes by better attendance?

Ms O'Neill: The answer is yes. I think the timeline for our strategy as a first tranche was to the end of 2012. As we would ordinarily do with our other programs they are undergoing a period of review and the corporate executive will give consideration to that over the next two months and then we will have discussions with the minister about whether we would want to change parts of that strategy, reconsider, build on or amend. So we are in that process right now.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you currently doing a review or is it on your list of reviews that will happen, hopefully, in the near future?

Ms O'Neill: It is not a review as in a formal review; it is part of our normal program governance of department for all strategies. I would ask the senior officers to reflect on the strategies, look at the data and the information coming forward. I would ordinarily ask why this part is working well—the same questions you would ask; why this is not working or why is it that we have not been able to get real change here; and for them to come back with that commentary to the corporate executive so that we can make decisions about whether to continue with all of the aspects of the strategy and whether we need to change aspects of the strategy. It is ongoing; we monitor all the time, but the teams will be looking at that in-depth work, because we need to advise schools for next year about whether we will do things differently or the same. I imagine there will be parts of this strategy we will want to maintain and parts we will want to amend, because a number of years have passed. We have learnt a bit more, there are more opportunities for us and on the basis of continuous improvement we would want to see if we can make it better than it is.

The CHAIRMAN: Before I begin the closing formalities, I will make a brief comment on our procedures. Our procedure now with the Auditor General's report is to write to you and seek a response, which you did and we thank you for that. If there are some issues on which we want further clarification we will have a hearing such as this. Then, with the supplementary information

that, hopefully, you will provide, we will put that in a report to the Parliament and sign off on this issue. That is our current procedure, whereas previously there was much more correspondence going backwards and forwards.

Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. The transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor areas. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added 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. We would also appreciate the specific answers to those matters that we raised. Thank you very much for giving your valuable time and for the evidence you have given to the committee.

Hearing concluded at 11.26 am
