Report 8

SETTING THE STAGE FOR IMPROVEMENT

Department of Education’s management of student attendance

(Follow-up of agency response to Auditor General’s Report No. 16 of 2015)

Presented by
Dr A.D. Buti, MLA
November 2018
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Published by the Parliament of Western Australia, Perth.
November 2018.
ISBN: 978-1-925724-31-8

Public Accounts Committee. Report 8)
Public Accounts Committee

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Presented by
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Laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly on 29 November 2018
Chair’s Foreword

In all analyses, average academic achievement on NAPLAN tests declined with any absence from school and continued to decline as absence rates increased. The nature of the relationship between absence from school and achievement, across all sub-groups of students strongly suggests that every day of attendance in school contributes towards a child’s learning, and that academic outcomes are enhanced by maximising attendance in school. There is no ‘safe’ threshold.

The effects of absence also accumulate over time. We found that absence from school was related to academic achievement in numeracy, reading and writing not only in the current year, but in future years as well. Parents need to be aware of these relationships, and understand that when their child misses school it can have an ongoing impact on their learning.

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts, 2013, p. v.

There is a strong positive correlation between school attendance and academic performance. In general, students who regularly attend school achieve better results; those who are often absent from the classroom tend to quickly fall behind. It is therefore incumbent on governments, policy-makers and administrators to be eternally vigilant in evaluating student attendance rates, and implementing measures to enhance student attendance.

In 2009, the Auditor General undertook a performance audit of attendance by Western Australian public school students in Years 1 to 10, highlighting opportunities for the Department of Education to improve its recording and management of student attendance in a report entitled Every Day Counts: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools. The Auditor General returned to this same issue in 2015, conducting a follow-up audit to examine whether the Department had ‘taken reasonable steps’ to address the weaknesses identified in 2009.

While acknowledging that ‘improving attendance is never easy or simple,’ the Auditor General found that ‘too many’ students remained at educational risk in 2015 because of their non-attendance. The Auditor General’s second audit report, entitled Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, identified numerous shortcomings in the Department’s response to the 2009 report.

Earlier this year the Public Accounts Committee considered the Auditor General’s 2015 report, and resolved to undertake our own follow-up of this situation. After holding a public hearing and receiving a response to some further written questions, we decided
to prepare our own report to provide Parliament with our assessment of the extent to which the Department has addressed the recommendations made by the Auditor General.

Under the Department's Student Attendance Policy, schools have primary responsibility for managing student attendance. However, the Department must provide schools with the conditions necessary to understand and respond to student absence. The Department must also provide leadership and support necessary for schools to establish the foundations and systems needed to improve student attendance.

Addressing poor student attendance is a complex and difficult challenge, with the reasons and nature of unexplained and unauthorised absences from school being multifaceted. Individual schools and the Department each have significant and crucial roles to play, with schools needing guidance from the Department on how to effectively intervene in cases of persistent unexplained or unauthorised absence. To provide this guidance, the Department needs to regularly and consistently evaluate and update its student attendance strategies.

Since the 2015 audit report, the Department has made some changes to improve its centralised guidance to schools, such as the online Student Attendance Toolkit, which gives schools resources, tools and guidance to record and manage student attendance. However, more work is needed to address the Auditor General's recommendations and improve processes for supporting schools to manage student attendance.

We believe the Department does not proactively identify schools in need of support to manage severe student attendance issues. We found gaps in the Department’s evaluation of student attendance initiatives, such as Responsible Parenting Agreements. Furthermore, the Department has not fully evaluated the Student Attendance Toolkit to determine its reach and usefulness across all schools with attendance issues. It is imperative that the Department evaluates all of its major attendance initiatives, and in doing so ensures that any evaluation methodology is reliable, valid and useful in addressing student attendance.

We also believe that the Department should take the opportunity to use its annual report to provide transparent information on student attendance, including information on variances in attendance and performance by geographical region. However, care must be taken to avoid creating a self-perpetuating adverse effect in reporting on poor student attendance performance by individual schools. While parents and students arguably have a right to know how their local school and region manages student attendance, care must be taken to ensure that the publication of any such comparative information does not exacerbate the problem due to parents withdrawing children with good attendance records from poorer performing schools.
Of course, while the Department plays a critical role, other government agencies and departments have roles to play, such as the Department of Communities. We all have an interest in ensuring that our children attend school—and as such we all have a role to play in that outcome. As observed in *Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts*: ‘Educators cannot do this alone: The community needs to be included.’

Any absence from school, whether authorised or unauthorised, must be discouraged and addressed. However, as research by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research has demonstrated, it is unauthorised absences that are of greatest concern. While authorised absences are not good, it is more ‘likely that unauthorised absences reflect more than just time away from school, but also possibly behavioural and school engagement issues.’

It is also the case that students from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds are most often adversely affected by school absence. According to the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research:

- *Some students are more adversely affected by absence than others. There are distinct gaps in achievement depending on where students live, their socio-economic status, mobility and Aboriginal status, and these gaps were observed at all levels of attendance ... Amongst disadvantaged students, achievement declined rapidly with increasing levels of absence.*

- *More advantaged children had relatively high achievement levels irrespective of their level of attendance at school. This pattern is particularly evident in the primary school years, and suggests that more advantaged children have alternative and effective resources that help them achieve learning objectives, both at school and in the home, during the early years of school.*

Community involvement in the education of our children is vital in the area of student attendance, particularly in relation to children from disadvantaged or troubled backgrounds. The Armadale Youth Intervention Partnership Education Program, which caters for students in years 6 to 8 (who are between 10 and 12 years of age), recognises the multi-faceted complexities and challenges in addressing poor student attendance at school. Under this program, which is funded by the McGowan Government, students are transported from home to school and home again at the end of the day. In separate classrooms, and with dedicated teachers, the students are provided with an alternative learning classroom experience to address varying literacy and numeracy abilities, learning difficulties, and overall emotional and cognitive functioning. Crucially, this program aims to ensure that participating students attend
school on a daily basis, and draws in support from the Department, from schools and their staff, from the Government, and from local businesses—it is a community effort.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to offer all at-risk students the resources available within the Armadale Youth Intervention Partnership Education Program. Yet even this brief description of the program demonstrates and reinforces that the Department and schools alone cannot solve the challenge of improving student attendance. What is important is that the Department provides leadership, and by evaluating measures and programs enacted to improve student attendance, helps ensure that the best strategies are maintained, and possibly expanded.

Another Government initiative is the Full Service School trial at Armadale Senior High School. Full Service Schools, also known as extended schools, have been successful both in Australia and overseas in not only boosting student educational and social outcomes, but also providing crucial early intervention services in lower socioeconomic areas. Full Service Schools provide a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community. Under the full service model, additional third-party and government services are provided to students and the community to complement the educational mandate of schools. This puts the school at the centre of a hub or precinct that offers multiple services for its entire community.

Initiatives like the Youth Intervention Partnership Education Program and the Full Service School trial are important, because the Department of Education is not solely responsible for ensuring students attend school. Parents have a vital role, as indeed do local communities and other government departments. We acknowledge the Department of Education’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. We hope this will assist the Department as it seeks to tackle the difficult challenge of improving student attendance at our public schools. The importance of school attendance for academic performance and societal development cannot be underestimated, and I urge all policy-makers, educators and anyone interested in the future of our students to engage with our recommendations.

I would like to acknowledge the work and diligence of my fellow committee members—Deputy Chair, Mr Dean Nalder, Member for Bateman; Mrs Lisa O’Malley, Member for Bicton; Mr Simon Millman, Member for Mount Lawley; and Mr Vince Catania, Member for North West Central. Further, on behalf of the committee, I would like to thank our secretariat: Principal Research Officer Mr Timothy Hughes, and Research Officers Mr Michael Burton and Dr Amy Lampard, for their excellent assistance and support.
The reasons for absences and poor achievement are likely to be multi-faceted, and any approach to improving the outcomes for disadvantaged students will require multiple approaches with shared responsibility between students, parents, schools and a range of government agencies.

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research
Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts, 2013, p. viii.

DR A.D. BUTI, MLA
CHAIR
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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.\(^1\) In 2015, the Auditor General found student attendance had not improved.\(^2\)

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

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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 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.
Ministerial Response

In accordance with Standing Order 277(1) of the Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly, the Public Accounts Committee directs that the Minister representing the Minister for Education report to the Assembly as to the action, if any, proposed to be taken by the Government with respect to the recommendations of the Committee.
Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1 Page 8
The Auditor General’s 2015 performance audit report *Follow On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools* called on the Department of Education to address five recommendations. Three of these recommendations require further action regarding evaluation, reporting, and identifying schools for support.

Finding 2 Page 8
The Department of Education did not provide schools, Statewide Services, regions or central services with direction on student attendance in either of its annual strategic guidelines documents, *Focus 2018* and *Focus 2019*.

Recommendation 1 Page 8
The Department of Education use future *Focus* publications to provide schools, Statewide Services, regional offices and/or central services with direction on student attendance.

Finding 3 Page 10
The fifth recommendation in the 2015 performance audit report called on the Department of Education to assist schools to build and maintain local partnerships to address student attendance. The Department of Education has since provided schools with more resources and tools to support their work with parents via the online Student Attendance Toolkit. In addition, Responsible Parenting Agreements are now more accessible for schools to use to address persistent student absence.

Recommendation 2 Page 10
The Department of Education promote and support the use of more pilot programs that encourage greater input from parents and communities in addressing student non-attendance.

Finding 4 Page 11
The third recommendation in the 2015 performance audit report called on the Department of Education to review its guidance to schools on the use of student absence codes. The Department of Education reported that it has performed this review and provided schools with guidance via the Student Attendance Toolkit.
Finding 5
The Department of Education has not addressed the Auditor General’s recommendation to ‘regularly evaluate’ the effectiveness of attendance initiatives. The Department of Education has evaluated some programs since the 2015 audit report, such as attendance advisory panels and badged attendance officers. However, the Department of Education has no plans to evaluate other major attendance initiatives, such as Responsible Parenting Agreements.

Recommendation 3
The Department of Education evaluate all major student attendance initiatives, including Responsible Parenting Agreements, and revise guidance to schools accordingly. This includes updating all policy, procedures, and guidelines provided to schools via the Student Attendance website.

Finding 6
The Department of Education used a voluntary school survey to evaluate the Student Attendance Toolkit. Due to weaknesses in the survey method, the evaluation did not determine the reach and usefulness of the resource across all schools with student attendance issues.

Recommendation 4
The Department of Education revise its methods for evaluating the Student Attendance Toolkit to ensure that, at a minimum, it collects information on the reach and usefulness of the resource across all schools with attendance issues. To achieve this, it should be compulsory for schools to complete the Student Attendance Toolkit evaluation survey.

Finding 7
The Department of Education could not quantify its expenditure on student attendance initiatives since the implementation of the Better Attendance: Brighter Futures strategy between 2010 and 2012.

Finding 8
The Department of Education does not proactively identify schools that need support to address student attendance. Instead, schools are responsible for monitoring their own performance and accessing training and assistance as required.

Recommendation 5
The Department of Education take proactive steps to identify schools in need of support to address student attendance.
Finding 9
The Department of Education has only partially addressed the fourth recommendation from the 2015 performance audit report, which called for more transparent reporting of student attendance. Since the 2015–16 annual report, the Department of Education has reported the percentage of students in each category of educational risk due to non-attendance. However, it does not report the number of students in each category. Arguably, this obscures the scale of educational risk due to non-attendance.

Finding 10
The Department of Education has not addressed the first part of the Auditor General’s fourth recommendation to set and report on targets for attendance at the school level. Some schools set their own targets and report progress in their annual School Report. The Department of Education provides guidance to assist target setting but does not require schools to set attendance targets.

Finding 11
The Department of Education has not addressed the third part of the Auditor General’s fourth recommendation to report the number of schools meeting target levels of attendance.

Finding 12
The Department of Education does not break down information about student attendance across metropolitan and regional areas in its annual report, despite considerable variation in attendance rates.

Recommendation 6
The Department of Education improve reporting of student attendance by including in its annual report:
- The number of students in each category of student attendance, in addition to the percentage.
- The percentage and number of students in each category of student attendance by region (and by local government area in non-metropolitan regions).
- The number of schools meeting their attendance targets by region (and by local government area in non-metropolitan regions).
Chapter 1

Audit report identifies a lack of progress in addressing student attendance

Everyone has the right to education.

Article 26(1), Universal Declaration of Human Rights
United Nations General Assembly, 1948

1.1 In this report, we examine the actions taken by the Department of Education (the Department) in response to the Auditor General’s August 2015 performance audit report, Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools.

Scope of audit report: action to address student attendance since the Auditor General’s 2009 report

1.2 In August 2009, the Auditor General reported the results of a performance audit that examined the student attendance of Western Australian public school students in Years 1 to 10. The report, Every Day Counts: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, found that 27.6 per cent of students were at educational risk due to non-attendance.3

1.3 The 2009 report highlighted opportunities for the Department to improve its recording and management of student attendance. The Auditor General recommended that the Department develop its understanding of the causes of non-attendance; review its attendance strategy; ensure data is available to monitor attendance; improve processes for responding to non-attendance; and evaluate interventions to address non-attendance.4

1.4 In August 2015, the Auditor General reported the results of a follow-up performance audit, which examined whether the Department had ‘taken reasonable steps’ to address the weaknesses identified in 2009.5

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3 Office of the Auditor General, Every Day Counts: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, 19 August 2009, p. 16.
4 ibid., pp. 7-8.
5 Office of the Auditor General, Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, 19 August 2015, p. 11.
Chapter 1

1.5 Under the School Education Act 1999, parents have primary responsibility for ensuring that children attend school.6 The Department ‘monitors and manages’ student attendance in accordance with its Student Attendance Policy and Student Attendance Procedures.7 Schools—through their principals—are responsible for implementing the requirements of these documents.8

1.6 Greater student non-attendance is associated with poorer educational outcomes.9 A 2013 report by researchers at the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research found there is ‘no “safe” threshold’ for student absence.10 Table 1 outlines the Department’s scheme for categorising educational risk due to non-attendance.

Table 1: Student attendance categories used by the Department of Education11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance category</th>
<th>Per cent attendance</th>
<th>Days absent per week</th>
<th>Years absent over 10 year education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular attendance</td>
<td>90-100</td>
<td>Up to 0.5</td>
<td>Up to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated educational risk</td>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>Between 0.5 and 1</td>
<td>Between 1 and 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate educational risk</td>
<td>60-79</td>
<td>Between 1 and 2</td>
<td>Between 2 and 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe educational risk</td>
<td>0-59</td>
<td>More than 2</td>
<td>More than 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Auditor General finds lack of improvement

1.7 While acknowledging that ‘improving attendance is never easy or simple,’ the Auditor General found that ‘too many’ students were still at educational risk due to non-attendance.12 The report identified numerous shortcomings in the Department’s response to the 2009 audit report.

1.8 Of principal concern was the lack of improvement in student attendance rates since the 2009 performance audit report. As detailed in Table 2, the pattern of regular student attendance and educational risk remained stable between 2009 and 2014. This indicated that strategies introduced by the Department since the 2009 audit report ‘had little overall effect’ on student attendance.13

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6 Section 38 School Education Act 1999 (WA).
8 Department of Education, Student Attendance Policy, 31 July 2017, p. 2.
10 ibid.
11 Office of the Auditor General, Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, 19 August 2015, pp. 6-12.
12 ibid., p. 4.
13 Office of the Auditor General, Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, 19 August 2015, p. 2.
Audit report identifies a lack of progress in addressing student attendance

Table 2: Pattern of student attendance in 2009 and 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance category</th>
<th>2009 (%)</th>
<th>2014 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular attendance</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated educational risk</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate educational risk</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe educational risk</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.9 Thirty per cent of students were at educational risk due to non-attendance in 2014. Specifically, 49,611 students were at indicated educational risk, 19,687 students were at moderate educational risk and 9,655 students were at severe educational risk due to non-attendance. Aboriginal students were overrepresented in educational risk categories. Approximately half of the 9,655 students at severe educational risk due to non-attendance were Aboriginal students.

1.10 According to the Auditor General, the Department had made an ‘important first step’ by improving their understanding of student non-attendance. The Department introduced a Student Attendance Reporting application in 2013 to record reasons for authorised and unauthorised absences. This change enabled the Department to collect ‘comprehensive information about the patterns and reasons for non-attendance.’

1.11 However, the Department did ‘not make good use of this information’ for reporting and analysis purposes. The Department’s 2013-14 annual report provided the average state-wide attendance rate (91 per cent), which ‘measures the number of students attending against the number of available school days.’ This average rate masked the number of students at educational risk due to non-attendance and missed an opportunity to ‘increase focus and responsibility.’ The Department also missed opportunities to analyse attendance data to ‘support more timely monitoring and decision-making.’ The report noted that the Department could use Student Attendance Reporting data to monitor school performance, identify trends, and target resources.

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15 ibid., p. 7.
16 ibid., p. 13.
17 ibid., p. 4.
18 ibid., p. 6.
19 ibid., p. 17.
21 Office of the Auditor General, *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2015, p. 18.
22 ibid.
23 ibid.
Chapter 1

1.12 The Department introduced new initiatives to address non-attendance following the 2009 audit report. The Better Attendance: Brighter Futures (BABF) strategy was introduced in 2010. BABF aimed to improve student attendance by providing direct support to students in need.\(^{24}\) The Attendance Improvement Measure process was key to this strategy, whereby 40 schools formed local stakeholder committees to ‘identify issues, plan for improvement and evaluate effectiveness.’\(^ {25}\) Other initiatives included SMS messaging software, Responsible Parenting Agreements, and a $48.7 million investment in 2013 to establish 16 Child and Parent Centres.\(^ {26}\) The 2015 audit report found these initiatives, including the BABF strategy, did not improve student attendance.\(^ {27}\)

1.13 The audit found that the Department failed to evaluate or review new initiatives. Despite receiving $15 million in funding over four years, the BABF strategy was never ‘formally evaluated’ against three key impact criteria.\(^ {28}\) As a result, the Department could not report the ‘effectiveness or efficiency’ of the program, nor could the Department ‘identify what elements may have worked and why.’\(^ {29}\)

1.14 The audit noted there had been a ‘significant shift of responsibility to individual schools’ since the 2009 audit.\(^ {30}\) Student-centred funding, a single-line budget, and the Independent Public School model have aimed to give schools greater flexibility to manage issues such as student attendance.

1.15 In the same period, support for schools was increasingly centralised. The Department replaced fourteen district education offices with eight regional education offices, reducing staff from 662 to 150.\(^ {31}\) In 2009, the Auditor General reported that district education offices could case-manage students and conduct home visits.\(^ {32}\) This role changed with the move to regional education offices, which instead ‘guide and facilitate local schools to meet their responsibilities.’\(^ {33}\) Central office is responsible for ‘high level monitoring of attendance and strategies specifically initiated by central office’ such as attendance advisory panels.\(^ {34}\)

\(^ {24}\) Office of the Auditor General, *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2015, p. 16.
\(^ {25}\) ibid.
\(^ {26}\) ibid., p. 23-24.
\(^ {27}\) ibid., p. 16.
\(^ {28}\) ibid., p. 7, p. 16-17.
\(^ {29}\) ibid., p. 16-17.
\(^ {30}\) ibid., p. 19.
\(^ {31}\) ibid.
\(^ {32}\) Office of the Auditor General, *Every Day Counts: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2009, p. 11.
\(^ {33}\) Office of the Auditor General, *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2015, p. 19.
\(^ {34}\) ibid.
Audit report identifies a lack of progress in addressing student attendance

1.16 The Auditor General found that Department oversight was important in the context of these structural changes. Specifically, the Department had ‘work to do to ensure that schools, principals and staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities in the new system, and what they can expect in support from regional and central offices.’

1.17 Finally, the 2015 audit report found the Department missed opportunities to provide better practice information to schools. Given rates of educational risk varied between schools, the Auditor General found that the Department should ‘identify schools that might be struggling or need greater support.’

Auditor General recommends greater support for schools and better evaluation and reporting

1.18 The Auditor General was optimistic that student attendance rates could improve with ‘concerted collaborative effort.’ The Auditor General recommended the Department:

1. Regularly evaluate and report to executive management on the effectiveness of its student attendance strategies and initiatives.

2. Clearly identify, communicate and provide training and assistance to schools on effective follow-up processes and procedures for managing unexplained and unauthorised absences.

3. Review absence codes and guidance to schools on using them, to make sure the codes:
   a. Are used consistently.
   b. Are mutually exclusive.
   c. Distinguish between authorised and unauthorised absences.
   d. Include all major forms of school absenteeism.

4. Provide better and more transparent information on student attendance, including in its Annual Report. This should include:
   a. Setting and reporting on targets for attendance at school level.
   b. Reporting student attendance by category of risk.
   c. Reporting the numbers of schools meeting target levels of attendance.

5. Provide greater assistance to schools to build and maintain partnerships in their local area that can help address student attendance issues.

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35 Office of the Auditor General, *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2015, p. 19.
36 ibid., p. 13.
37 ibid., p. 4.
Chapter 2

Committee follow-up of agency response

Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.

Sitting Bull

2.1 Given consistent lack of progress on student attendance and public interest in this area, we examined the Department’s response to the 2015 performance audit report. The Public Accounts Committee’s role in following up performance audit reports is outlined in Appendix One.

2.2 The Department appeared before us at a public hearing on 13 June 2018. The transcript is provided at Appendix Two. The Department also provided a response to questions on notice and supplementary questions following the hearing (see Appendix Three).

Student attendance is a shared responsibility but the Department can do more

2.3 We acknowledge that student attendance is a complex and challenging issue. As highlighted by the then Director General of the Department, student attendance ‘is as much about life outside of school as it is inside of school’ and is ‘a deeply social problem.’38 This policy area requires the Department to work with issues and stakeholders beyond its direct control. We therefore concur with the Department that addressing student attendance is a shared responsibility between schools, parents and communities.39

2.4 The Department has made some positive changes in response to the 2015 audit report, but more can be done to address the Auditor General’s recommendations. In particular, we find the Department needs to take further action to address Recommendations 1, 2 and 4. The complex nature of student absence only strengthens the need for the Department to follow proper processes for reporting, providing centralised support, and evaluation.

2.5 Notably, the Department appears to have low expectations regarding future improvements in student attendance. The former Director General40 described student

38 Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 5.
40 Since appearing before the committee, Ms Sharyn O’Neill has been appointed to the role of Public Sector Commissioner.
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attendance as ‘a very difficult issue’ where it ‘is very hard to effect any change.’

Further, she expressed a lack of confidence that a key Department initiative following the 2015 audit report—the Student Attendance Toolkit—would positively impact student attendance:

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.

To meet this challenge, the Department requires a clear strategic direction regarding student attendance. We expect this to include priority initiatives to address student attendance and a statement of the expected impact of these initiatives. We were surprised to note the Department did not mention student attendance in Focus 2018 or Focus 2019. These documents provide ‘schools, Statewide Services, regions and central services with a clear direction for priority actions in public education for the year.’ The absence of student attendance direction in Focus 2018 and Focus 2019 suggests a lack of strategic emphasis on student attendance in this period.

Finding 1

The Auditor General’s 2015 performance audit report Follow On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools called on the Department of Education to address five recommendations. Three of these recommendations require further action regarding evaluation, reporting, and identifying schools for support.

Finding 2

The Department of Education did not provide schools, Statewide Services, regions or central services with direction on student attendance in either of its annual strategic guidelines documents, Focus 2018 and Focus 2019.

Recommendation 1

The Department of Education use future Focus publications to provide schools, Statewide Services, regional offices and/or central services with direction on student attendance.

41 Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 3.
42 ibid., p. 5.
The Department has made some changes in response to the Auditor General’s report

Schools have been given resources to develop partnerships with parents

2.7 Recommendation 5 of the 2015 audit report called on the Department to assist schools to develop local partnerships that help address student non-attendance. The Department has since addressed this recommendation by providing schools with resources to support engagement with parents.

2.8 In response to the 2015 report, the Department released an online Student Attendance Toolkit in 2017. The Student Attendance Toolkit provides schools with resources to help them monitor and manage student attendance. One purpose of this resource is to help schools ‘engage their communities to support and promote school attendance.’ Resources include parent information sheets, ideas for newsletter articles, and videos for schools to share with their community. The Department reported a positive response to the Student Attendance Toolkit. Of the 102 schools that responded to the evaluation survey, 85 per cent reported the resource was ‘effective.’

2.9 The Department has also undertaken further work to support school’s use of Responsible Parenting Agreements. As the former Director General explained:

...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... we have had an increase in the number of those agreements that are being used.

2.10 Responsible Parenting Agreements are voluntary agreements formed between parents and an authorised officer from the Department of Education, Department of Communities, and/or Department of Corrective Services. Responsible Parenting Agreements specify actions to be taken by parents and the Department. The use of

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46 Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 3.
47 Mr Martin Clery, Assistant Executive Director, Teaching and Student Support Services, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 4.
48 Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 4.
49 ibid., p. 9.
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these agreements has increased since the 2015 audit report, from 80 in 2015 to 149 in 2017.\textsuperscript{52}

2.11 The Department is also conducting a three-year pilot of a ‘wraparound style service’ at Armadale Senior High School, under the Full Service Schools program.\textsuperscript{53} The pilot may include programs such as after-school activities, vacation care, life skills training, TAFE/VET programs, specialist health services, and community-based projects.\textsuperscript{54} As lead agency, the Department has worked with the Department of Communities, Department of Justice, Department of Health, and the Western Australia Police Force to guide development of the pilot.\textsuperscript{55} The Department expects this program to have some impact on local student attendance.\textsuperscript{56}

Finding 3

The fifth recommendation in the 2015 performance audit report called on the Department of Education to assist schools to build and maintain local partnerships to address student attendance. The Department of Education has since provided schools with more resources and tools to support their work with parents via the online Student Attendance Toolkit. In addition, Responsible Parenting Agreements are now more accessible for schools to use to address persistent student absence.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Education promote and support the use of more pilot programs that encourage greater input from parents and communities in addressing student non-attendance.

The Department has reviewed guidance on absence codes

Recommendation 3 in the 2015 audit report called on the Department to review its guidance to schools regarding the use of student absence codes. The Department reported that this review has been completed.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{52} Department of Education, \textit{Annual Report 2017–18}, September 2018, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{53} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, \textit{Transcript of Evidence}, 13 June 2018, p. 5; Hon Sue Ellery, Minister for Education and Training, \textit{Armadale Senior High School to pilot Full Service Schools program}, Media Statement, Government of Western Australia, 6 December 2017.
\textsuperscript{54} Hon Sue Ellery, Minister for Education and Training, \textit{Armadale Senior High School to pilot Full Service Schools program}, Media Statement, Government of Western Australia, 6 December 2017.
\textsuperscript{55} ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, \textit{Transcript of Evidence}, 13 June 2018, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{57} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 8.
The Department confirmed it has provided guidance to help schools record absences in a manner consistent with the recommendation.\textsuperscript{58} Guidelines are outlined in the Student Attendance Fundamentals module within the Student Attendance Toolkit.\textsuperscript{59}

**Finding 4**
The third recommendation in the 2015 performance audit report called on the Department of Education to review its guidance to schools on the use of student absence codes. The Department of Education reported that it has performed this review and provided schools with guidance via the Student Attendance Toolkit.

**There are significant gaps in the Department’s evaluation of student attendance initiatives**

Recommendation 1 in the 2015 audit report called on the Department to ‘regularly evaluate’ the effectiveness of attendance initiatives. The Program Evaluation Unit within the Department of Treasury describes evaluation as ‘a key tool for ensuring efficient and effective delivery of government services.’\textsuperscript{60} Given the consistent lack of improvement in student attendance, evaluation of attendance initiatives should be central to the Department’s process of program implementation. However, the Department’s approach to evaluation appears to be piecemeal and sporadic.

The Department has evaluated some attendance initiatives since the 2015 audit report. In 2016, an independent consultant evaluated the effectiveness of attendance advisory panels and badged attendance officers.\textsuperscript{61} The evaluation identified that attendance advisory panels had ‘an initial positive impact’ on attendance, but that attendance issues returned thereafter.\textsuperscript{62} The Department’s Executive Director for Statewide Services explained that the evaluation results should inform the targeting of attendance advisory panels:

...our well-intended approach of targeting the most severely at risk for attendance panels turned out to be not a terribly good idea... 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... we

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{58} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 8.
\bibitem{59} ibid.
\bibitem{61} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 3.
\bibitem{62} Mr Martin Clery, Assistant Executive Director, Teaching and Support Services, Department of Education, \textit{Transcript of Evidence}, 13 June 2018, p. 12.
\end{thebibliography}
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would probably need to rethink the encouragement we give to people about how they are best targeted.\textsuperscript{63}

2.16 The Department has developed implementation plans in response to the results of this evaluation.\textsuperscript{64} According to the Department, evaluation findings were used to inform the advice provided to schools via the Student Attendance Toolkit and Student Attendance website.\textsuperscript{65} However, it appears the Department has not provided schools with recent advice regarding the targeting of attendance advisory panels in its Student Attendance Procedures or Guidelines for Attendance Advisory Panels.\textsuperscript{66}

2.17 In line with the findings of the 2015 audit report, the Department confirmed that it did not formally evaluate the Better Attendance: Brighter Futures (BABF) strategy, which ultimately operated for only two years.\textsuperscript{67} The Department explained that the nine strategies that formed BABF had ‘widely varying implementation approaches and associated monitoring and data gathering.’\textsuperscript{68} The Department collected centralised data on only some aspects of the nine strategies.

2.18 Of significant concern, the Department indicated it has ‘no current intentions to formally evaluate’ other attendance initiatives.\textsuperscript{69} These include the Student Attendance Reporting application and the Attendance Improvement Measure process. They also include Responsible Parenting Agreements, which schools have used increasingly in recent years.\textsuperscript{70} Under the Department’s Student Attendance Procedures, principals are advised to consider Responsible Parenting Agreements as one of two key strategies to address persistent non-attendance.\textsuperscript{71} We therefore find it striking that the Department appears to have no plan to evaluate the use or effectiveness of this intervention.

2.19 We identified weaknesses in the Department’s evaluation of the Student Attendance Toolkit, which appears to be a cornerstone of its current approach to student attendance. To evaluate the ‘usefulness’ of the resource to schools, the Department

\begin{itemize}
\item Mr Lindsay Hale, Executive Director, Statewide Services, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 12.
\item Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 3.
\item ibid.
\item Department of Education, Student Attendance Procedures, 22 February 2018; Department of Education, Guidelines for Attendance Advisory Panels, 2014.
\item Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 4.
\item ibid.
\item ibid., p. 3.
\item The number of Responsible Parenting Agreements increased from 35 in 2014 to 149 in 2017. See Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 9; Office of the Auditor General, Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, 19 August 2015, p. 24.
\item Department of Education, Student Attendance Procedures, 22 February 2018, p. 6.
\end{itemize}
implemented a survey in 2017.\textsuperscript{72} The survey was voluntary and did not require survey respondents to identify their school. Of 802 public schools in WA, only 102 schools completed the evaluation survey.\textsuperscript{73} If the survey was sent to all schools, this represents a 12.7 per cent response rate. Given the survey was voluntary, the Department did not collect information on the overall reach of the toolkit, nor its usefulness to the majority of schools. Importantly, the Department could not identify how many schools with student attendance issues had used the toolkit, nor how many of these schools found it useful. We believe the Department needs this information to determine whether the toolkit has provided useful resources to schools. The Department has stated that future surveys will require respondents to identify their school.\textsuperscript{74} This will enable the Department to determine—among those schools that respond to the survey—the usefulness of the toolkit for schools with student attendance issues. However, the Department has not stated whether it will make this survey mandatory in order to determine the toolkit’s usefulness across all schools with attendance issues.

2.20 The Department does not know how much it has spent on attendance initiatives since the implementation of the 2010 BABF strategy.\textsuperscript{75} Nor does it collate data on how much schools have spent on their own attendance initiatives.\textsuperscript{76} The Department explained:

\textit{It is not possible to accurately quantify the total amount spent by the Department on all attendance initiatives since the roll-out of BABF. This is because funding used to support attendance is contained within school, regional and central budget allocations and FTE, which are often not disaggregated to attendance specific activities.}\textsuperscript{77}

2.21 Without this information, the Department cannot evaluate whether attendance initiatives provide a return on investment.

2.22 The Department of Treasury’s Program Evaluation Unit has confirmed that:

\textit{Historically, there has been a limited focus on the evaluation of program delivery and results. In an environment of constrained public finances, it is essential that public funds are spent on activities that provide the greatest economic and social return.}\textsuperscript{78}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, pp. 1 and 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{75} ibid., p. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{76} ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{77} ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Program Evaluation Unit, \textit{Evaluation Guide}, Department of Treasury, Government of Western Australia, Perth, January 2015, p. 1.
\end{itemize}
It is in the context of these comments that we would like to see the Department adopt a more consistent and rigorous approach to evaluating all of its student attendance initiatives.

Finding 5
The Department of Education has not addressed the Auditor General’s recommendation to ‘regularly evaluate’ the effectiveness of attendance initiatives. The Department of Education has evaluated some programs since the 2015 audit report, such as attendance advisory panels and badged attendance officers. However, the Department of Education has no plans to evaluate other major attendance initiatives, such as Responsible Parenting Agreements.

Recommendation 3
The Department of Education evaluate all major student attendance initiatives, including Responsible Parenting Agreements, and revise guidance to schools accordingly. This includes updating all policy, procedures, and guidelines provided to schools via the Student Attendance website.

Finding 6
The Department of Education used a voluntary school survey to evaluate the Student Attendance Toolkit. Due to weaknesses in the survey method, the evaluation did not determine the reach and usefulness of the resource across all schools with student attendance issues.

Recommendation 4
The Department of Education revise its methods for evaluating the Student Attendance Toolkit to ensure that, at a minimum, it collects information on the reach and usefulness of the resource across all schools with attendance issues. To achieve this, it should be compulsory for schools to complete the Student Attendance Toolkit evaluation survey.

Finding 7
The Department of Education could not quantify its expenditure on student attendance initiatives since the implementation of the Better Attendance: Brighter Futures strategy between 2010 and 2012.

Schools with attendance issues should be identified and targeted for support
The 2015 report found that the Department did not have consistent processes for providing assistance to schools to address non-attendance. The Auditor General recommended that the Department ‘identify, communicate and provide training and
Committee follow-up of agency response

assistance’ to help schools address non-attendance.\textsuperscript{79} Despite making some progress, it is our view that the Department has not fully addressed each component of this recommendation. The main outstanding issue relates to how the Department identifies schools in need of support.

**The Department does not proactively identify schools in need of support**

We asked the Department how it identifies schools that require assistance to manage unexplained and unauthorised student absences. In response, the Department referred to review processes undertaken by the Public School Accountability Unit (formerly the Expert Review Group).\textsuperscript{80} Student attendance issues and their impact on student performance are reported on as part of the Unit’s review processes.\textsuperscript{81}

However, when we asked how many schools the Department had identified that were in need of training and assistance, the Department stated:

*There is no formal process for identifying schools that specifically need support in this area.*\textsuperscript{82}

Further, the Department responded that since 2015, the Expert Review Group has identified only nine schools that needed to address ‘attendance and its impact on student performance.’\textsuperscript{83} Only one of these schools was identified in 2017. According to the Department, ‘these schools received support to address attendance.’\textsuperscript{84}

It seems likely that this review process does not identify all schools with significant attendance issues. For example, the 2015 audit report identified that 97 schools had more than 50 per cent of their students at educational risk due to non-attendance.\textsuperscript{85} Further, the report found that 24 schools had approximately one in three students at severe educational risk due to non-attendance.\textsuperscript{86} We expect schools with this form of attendance issue to be proactively identified for support.

\textsuperscript{79} Recommendation 2; Office of the Auditor General, *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2015, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{80} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{81} ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{83} ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} Office of the Auditor General, *Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools*, 19 August 2015, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{86} ibid.
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2.29 Instead of proactively identifying schools in need of support, the Department seems to expect schools to use the ‘extensive range of student attendance data’ it provides to self-identify student attendance issues and access training and assistance as needed.  

Finding 8
The Department of Education does not proactively identify schools that need support to address student attendance. Instead, schools are responsible for monitoring their own performance and accessing training and assistance as required.

Recommendation 5
The Department of Education take proactive steps to identify schools in need of support to address student attendance.

While the Department provides schools with resources and tools, it is unclear if sufficient support is consistently available for severe student attendance issues

2.30 The Department provides schools with a range of tools to understand and identify student attendance issues:

- The Student Attendance Reporting system provides attendance reports at the student, school, region and state levels.

- The Student Achievement Information System links student attendance data with student performance data. This allows schools to evaluate the effect of attendance on educational outcomes and plan interventions ‘at the school, year group, classroom or individual student levels’.

- Schools can track individual student attendance via Online Student Information and link attendance to performance and enrolment information.

- Schools can compare their attendance performance to other schools via Schools Online.

- Staff can access the Student Attendance Connect Community online forum to share and receive advice, including guidance from central office staff.

2.31 In addition, the online Student Attendance Toolkit assists schools to record attendance, self-assess performance, analyse data, embed practices to address non-attendance, and set targets.

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87 Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, pp. 5-6.
88 ibid., p. 5.
89 ibid.
90 ibid.
While the Department provides schools with these resources and tools, it seems likely that some schools may require direct support to address a complex issue such as school attendance. For example, of the ten identified schools that completed the School Attendance Toolkit survey and had an attendance rate below 90 per cent, only two had ‘developed an implementation plan to improve student attendance.’\footnote{Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 1.} This may change with time, when schools have more opportunity to engage with the toolkit. However, we are concerned that some schools with lower attendance rates may need direct support to identify and implement strategies to improve student attendance.

In particular, schools may need direct support to improve attendance for students at severe educational risk due to non-attendance. The Department’s \textit{Student Attendance Procedures} advise that principals should implement an attendance advisory panel in cases of persistent student absence.\footnote{Department of Education, \textit{Student Attendance Procedures}, 22 February 2018, p. 6.} However, the Department’s Executive Director, Statewide Services, acknowledged that attendance advisory panels are not a successful strategy for students at severe educational risk due to non-attendance.\footnote{Mr Lindsay Hale, Executive Director, Statewide Services, Department of Education, \textit{Transcript of Evidence}, 13 June 2018, p. 12.} He went on to emphasise the importance of more intensive support for severe student attendance issues in some schools:

\begin{quote}
...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... 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.\footnote{ibid., pp. 12-13.}
\end{quote}

We are aware of one initiative that will provide a select group of schools with direct support. Starting in 2018, the Department has provided support to ten remote schools (now extended to 19 public schools)\footnote{Hon Sue Ellery, Minister for Education and Training, and Hon Alannah MacTiernan, Minister for Regional Development, \textit{Additional Kimberley schools join initiative to encourage attendance}, Media Statement, Government of Western Australia, 20 November 2018.} via the Kimberley Schools Project. The Department:

\begin{quote}
...supported these schools to intensify and accelerate children’s learning through targeted teaching practices, with planning underway for a
\end{quote}
focus on community engagement, early childhood initiatives and attendance. Support included expert staff visiting the schools to provide one-on-one support and advice to principals and teachers, and specifically developed curriculum materials.\textsuperscript{96}

2.35 However, the level of support that other schools receive to address severe student attendance issues is not clear. The Department stated that, if required, schools could access ‘staff with attendance related knowledge and expertise from Statewide Services and regional offices.’\textsuperscript{97} Within the Statewide Services Unit, the Student Wellbeing branch of the Student Support Services Directorate performs attendance-related roles. However, this branch provides ‘policy advice and guidance’\textsuperscript{98}, which may not meet the level of support required by some schools. The branch has a host of other roles related to student attendance. It is responsible for managing the \textit{Student Attendance Policy}, maintaining the Student Attendance Toolkit and website, managing the Students Whose Whereabouts are Unknown database, badging attendance officers, and reporting on the number of attendance advisory panels.\textsuperscript{99} The branch has approximately four full-time equivalent positions to perform these roles, indicating it has little time to devote to individual schools.\textsuperscript{100}

2.36 We did not specifically question the Department on the level of support that regional offices provide to schools. The Department’s \textit{Student Attendance Procedures} and associated documents indicate that regional offices may assist if a school holds a formal case conference with parents.\textsuperscript{101} In addition, the Regional Executive Director plays a role in convening attendance advisory panels for non-Independent Public Schools.\textsuperscript{102} Beyond this, the Department stated that ‘central office, regional offices, and Statewide Services’ support schools to address student attendance by providing them with ‘\textit{data, tools and resources} to select and adapt as deemed suitable’ [emphasis added].\textsuperscript{103} This description implies that regional offices do not provide significant hands-on support to help schools address severe student attendance issues. However, we did not explore this issue in depth.

\textsuperscript{97} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{98} ibid., p. 8.
\textsuperscript{99} ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 7.
More can be done to improve reporting of student attendance

In the 2015 audit report, the Auditor General recommended changes to the Department’s reporting of student attendance. We found the Department has only partially addressed this recommendation.

The Department reports the percentage but not number of students in each category of educational risk

Since its 2014–15 annual report, and in accordance with Recommendation 4B in the performance audit report, the Department has reported the percentage of students in each category of educational risk due to non-attendance. Further, in its 2016–17 and 2017–18 annual reports, the Department depicted this information for the previous four-year and five-year period respectively. These are important steps in improving information and transparency.

However, the Department does not report the number of students in each category of educational risk. Reporting this information would improve transparency and accountability regarding the scale of educational risk due to non-attendance. This would also be consistent with the Department’s practice in other areas, such as the reporting of student retention and achievement. The Education and Health Standing Committee made the same recommendation to the Department in 2012, but it has yet to be addressed.

Finding 9
The Department of Education has only partially addressed the fourth recommendation from the 2015 performance audit report, which called for more transparent reporting of student attendance. Since the 2015–16 annual report, the Department of Education has reported the percentage of students in each category of educational risk due to non-attendance. However, it does not report the number of students in each category. Arguably, this obscures the scale of educational risk due to non-attendance.

104 Recommendation 4; Office of the Auditor General, Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools, 19 August 2015, p. 9.
109 Education and Health Standing Committee, A Child who is Healthy, Attends School, and is Able to Read will have Better Educational Outcomes, Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Western Australia, Perth, November 2012, p. 20.
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The Department does not set and report on attendance targets at the school level

2.40 The Department has not addressed the Auditor General’s recommendation to set and report on targets for student attendance at the school level (Recommendation 4A). Instead, individual schools can choose to set their own attendance target.\textsuperscript{110} The Department has also not addressed the Auditor General’s recommendation to report the number of schools that meet target levels of attendance (Recommendation 4C).

2.41 In \textit{Focus 2016}, the Department called for schools to ‘[e]stablish targets to improve the proportion of students with more than 90\% attendance.’\textsuperscript{111} However, the Department has not made it mandatory for schools to set attendance targets.\textsuperscript{112} If schools choose to set their own attendance target, the Student Attendance Toolkit provides guidance to assist schools in this process.\textsuperscript{113}

2.42 When we questioned this approach to target setting, the former Director General provided assurance that:

\textit{...there are very few schools that have real attendance issues that do not have it as their number one priority and a target.}\textsuperscript{114}

2.43 Nevertheless, if schools with student attendance issues are not required to set targets, there is a risk that some schools may not give student attendance the focus it deserves. We therefore see merit in the Department requiring schools to set student attendance targets.

2.44 While the Department does not report on school level targets in its annual report, some schools report on student attendance targets and related progress in their School Plan and annual School Reports. These documents are required under the Department’s \textit{School Improvement and Accountability in Public Schools} policy.\textsuperscript{115} School Plans outline strategic direction and School Reports provide the community with information about school performance. The Department publishes these documents on the Schools Online system.

2.45 We see value in the Department reporting the number of schools that meet attendance targets in its annual report. This would increase transparency regarding school-level progress to improve student attendance. Without centralised reporting of progress to

\begin{footnotesize}
111 Department of Education, \textit{Focus 2016}, December 2015, p. 3.
113 ibid.
114 ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
meet attendance targets at the school level, there is a risk that the lack of progress of some schools may pass unattended.

**Finding 10**
The Department of Education has not addressed the first part of the Auditor General’s fourth recommendation to set and report on targets for attendance at the school level. Some schools set their own targets and report progress in their annual School Report. The Department of Education provides guidance to assist target setting but does not require schools to set attendance targets.

**Finding 11**
The Department of Education has not addressed the third part of the Auditor General’s fourth recommendation to report the number of schools meeting target levels of attendance.

**Additional reporting issues were noted**

2.46 In response to the Committee’s request, the Department provided information about student attendance rates broken down across WA’s regions and metropolitan locations (see Tables 3, 4 and 5 on the next page). We found this information valuable in highlighting the variability in student attendance between geographical areas. However, the Department has not previously published this information in its annual report. It is our view that reporting this information would improve transparency and highlight differences in student attendance, particularly in the State’s non-metropolitan regions. Arguably, the data for these regions needs to be broken down further, at a minimum, by local government area. As WA’s non-metropolitan regions are so vast, it is difficult to ascertain from the figures provided in Table 5 below whether a particular district within a region may be experiencing greater difficulties with student attendance issues. Such district level information is critical to helping government, policy makers, and parliamentarians identify where problems are most acute and where relevant resources and pilot programs are most urgently required.

2.47 We also questioned the Department’s use of a 90 per cent attendance threshold to categorise regular student attendance. With this threshold, a student can be absent from school up to one day per fortnight and still be considered a “regular” attendee. The Department explained that this aligns with the national approach. However, its Director of System and School Performance highlighted that this is not consistent with

116 The Kimberley region covers 424,517 square kilometres (km²) across 4 local government areas; the Pilbara has four local government areas across 507,896km²; and the Wheatbelt has 42 local government areas across 154,862km².

117 Mr Alan Dodson, Director, System and School Performance, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 2.
research findings that ‘every day does count.’ The Director indicated that a current review may recommend a 95 per cent attendance threshold for the highest attendance category. We support the aspiration behind this higher rate.

Table 3: 2017 student attendance rates and categories by metropolitan and regional

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<th>Location</th>
<th>Attendance Rate %</th>
<th>Percentage of Students in Attendance Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>90-100% attendance</td>
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<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
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<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: 2017 student attendance rates and categories by geolocation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Attendance Rate %</th>
<th>Percentage of Students in Attendance Categories</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Major Cities</td>
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<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Regional</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer Regional</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Remote</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 5: 2017 student attendance rates and categories by education regional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Attendance Rate %</th>
<th>Percentage of Students in Attendance Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>90-100% attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Metropolitan</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Metropolitan</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>73.7</td>
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<td>Goldfields</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>56.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kimberley</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
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<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilbara</td>
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<td>52.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheatbelt</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

118 Mr Alan Dodson, Director, System and School Performance, Department of Education, Transcript of Evidence, 13 June 2018, p. 2.
119 Ibid.
120 Ms Sharyn O’Neill, Director General, Department of Education, Letter to the Committee, 6 July 2018, p. 2. Attendance data provided for Semester 1 in accordance with National Standards for Student Data Attendance Reporting.
Finding 12

The Department of Education does not break down information about student attendance across metropolitan and regional areas in its annual report, despite considerable variation in attendance rates.

Recommendation 6

The Department of Education improve reporting of student attendance by including in its annual report:

- The number of students in each category of student attendance, in addition to the percentage.
- The percentage and number of students in each category of student attendance by region (and by local government area in non-metropolitan regions).
- The number of schools meeting their attendance targets by region (and by local government area in non-metropolitan regions).
Appendix One

Public Accounts Committee’s role in following up reports from the Auditor General

The Office of the Auditor General plays a key role in public administration by examining how effectively public sector agencies implement government policies and programs. To perform this task the Auditor General routinely conducts performance audits, which can highlight examples of good practice or identify deficiencies in an agency’s operations and procedures.

Performance audit reports generally include recommendations designed to help the audited agency address any identified shortcomings, thereby facilitating a more efficient use of public money. Yet there is no formal requirement for agencies to provide a response to these recommendations and the Auditor General has no authority to demand one.

Consequently, public accounts committees (PACs) across most Commonwealth jurisdictions provide some form of support to their audit offices to ensure performance audit recommendations receive due consideration. In Western Australia, the PAC has undertaken an agency follow-up process since 1996 although the approach has varied over the six parliamentary sessions that have ensued.

Our approach is based on a triage methodology that assigns a follow-up rating based on five criteria:
- program or policy cost;
- public interest;
- criticality of audit findings;
- level of urgency; and
- level of commitment and detail provided by the audited agency in its initial response (which is usually included in the audit report).

In March this year, following the conclusion of our inquiry into the management and oversight of the Perth Children’s Hospital project, we triaged 25 performance audit reports from 2015 and 2016.

Out of this process, nine reports fell within our ‘low-priority’ triage range. For these reports, we have opted to conclude our follow-up while reserving the right to open correspondence with the audited agencies should circumstances warrant interrogation in future.
Appendix One

Nine other reports fell within our ‘medium-priority’ range. With one of these reports, we chose to conclude our follow-up. For the remaining eight, we have sought and received written responses from the audited agencies. These follow-ups remain open while we consider the adequacy of the responses.

Seven reports received a ‘high-priority’ triage score. For one of these, we decided to write to the audited agencies, as they appeared to have already addressed the most pressing issues identified by the Auditor General. For the other six reports, we thought it appropriate to call the audited agencies in for a public hearing where we could discuss their response to the audit reports in depth. These hearings were conducted over three sitting weeks in June this year and we followed-up each agency with a series of further written questions.

We are in the midst of delivering a series of reports highlighting those follow-ups where we retain concern over the adequacy of the agency responses, or where we see opportunities to build on some encouraging actions.

We have already tabled two of these reports. Report No. 6, No (More) Time to Waste, examined the audited agencies’ responses to the Auditor General’s 2016 report on the Western Australian Waste Strategy. Report No. 7, Further Along the Path, looked at how the relevant agencies responded to the 2015 audit report on efforts to make cycling a safe and viable method of transport in the Perth metropolitan area.

In this report, we summarise the actions taken by the Department of Education in response to the Auditor General’s August 2015 performance audit report Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools.
Appendix Two

Transcript of hearing with the Department of Education

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
Appendix Two

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 Bicton.

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.
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. Interestingly 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 —
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—
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 TIK 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’NEIL: 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 etcetera. 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’NEIL: 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.
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.
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
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?
Appendix Two

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.

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.
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?
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 Burrinjurrrah—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.
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 at 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.
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.ナルダー: 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.ナルダー: 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
Appendix Three

Department of Education’s response to further questions

Mr Tim Hughes
Principal Research Officer
Public Accounts Committee
Parliament House

Email: lapac@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Mr Hughes

I refer to a letter dated 21 June 2018 from Dr Tony Buti MLA, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, regarding the Committee hearing concerning the implementation of recommendations made by the Auditor General in Report No. 16 of 2015: Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools.

Further to the information provided at the hearing on 13 June 2018, please find attached the Department of Education’s response to the additional questions.

Yours sincerely,

SHARYN O’NEILL
DIRECTOR GENERAL

05 JUL 2018

Att.
FURTHER QUESTIONS - PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE HEARING INTO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS IN RESPONSE TO THE AUDITOR GENERAL’S REPORT NUMBER 15 OF 2015 - FOLLOW ON: MANAGING STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1. [From page 10 of the transcript] What is the rate of uptake of the Student Attendance Toolkit among schools with lower average attendance rates (i.e. lower than 90 per cent)?

As part of the ongoing monitoring of the Student Attendance Toolkit (the Toolkit), an online evaluation survey was distributed to schools in Term 4, 2017 and concluded on 31 December 2017.

The purpose of the survey was to seek feedback from schools on the usefulness of the resources and professional learning modules which comprise the Toolkit. To encourage open and unmoderated feedback, respondents were not required to identify their school.

There were 102 responses to the survey. Of the schools that responded, only 16 elected to identify their school name. Ten of these were schools with an attendance rate below 90%.

Of these schools:
- 80% of all respondents are engaging with the toolkit in some capacity.
- Of these, 40% are utilising the toolkit, 40% of respondents are in the familiarisation stage and early stages of using the toolkit.
- 20% of the schools who identified their school name did not identify their level of engagement with the toolkit.
- 20% of the identified schools with an attendance rate below 90% have developed an implementation plan to improve student attendance.

Of the identified schools with an attendance rate below 90%, the areas/ practice and ways of thinking that have changed since utilising the toolkit included:
- becoming actively engaged in professional learning relating to improving student attendance;
- understanding the process and requirements regarding student attendance;
- acknowledging and understanding my role in relation to improving student attendance;
- making adjustments to classroom practice to improve attendance;
- investigating and implementing classroom resources and activities to address student engagement; and
- actively addressing student non-attendance in the classroom.

Future surveys will require that respondents identify their school to assist with gauging the rate of engagement with the Toolkit of schools with less than 90% attendance rates.
Department of Education’s response to further questions

2. [From pages 10 and 11 of the transcript] Please provide a breakdown of student attendance rates, for each of the four risk categories, by region (i.e. rural and regional versus metropolitan).

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<th>Percentage of Students in Attendance Categories</th>
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2017 Student Attendance Rates and Categories by Geolocation

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2017 Student Attendance Rates and Categories by Education Regional

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<td>Pilbara</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheatbelt</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Attendance data are provided for Semester 1 in accordance with the National Student Data Reporting Standards.
3. The audit report referred to numerous strategies and initiatives (e.g. the Attendance Improvement Measure (AIM) process, the Student Attendance Reporting (SAR) application, and Responsible Parenting Agreements) employed by the department. Is the department regularly evaluating these and other attendance strategies and initiatives?
   a. Who conducts these evaluations?
   b. Are the results disseminated across all schools?
   c. Is the Minister briefed on the outcome of these evaluations?
      i. If so, in what form are these briefings delivered (e.g. written or verbal)?

In 2016, the Department procured the Nous Group Pty Ltd to conduct an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of attendance advisory panels and badged attendance officers. The evaluation, Evaluation of Attendance Panels and Badging of Attendance Officers, concluded in April 2017. The Department developed a response and implementation plans to the 18 findings of the evaluation.

Report findings are used to inform the advice and support provided to schools on these and related issues, for example within the Student Attendance Toolkit and the Student Attendance website. Schools are also informed, via the Department’s communication channels, of attendance related information, strategies and policy changes that directly impact on their operations.

A written briefing on the evaluation was prepared for the Minister, which was discussed at the Director General’s meeting with the Minister on 30 May 2017.

There are no current intentions to formally evaluate other attendance related strategies, although attendance outcomes and related strategies will continue to be reported through Budget Estimates and Annual Report hearings.

4. When and how will the department collect data that will demonstrate the success or otherwise of the Student Attendance Toolkit initiative?
   a. What metrics will the department use to determine the Toolkit’s effectiveness?

The Student Attendance Toolkit (the Toolkit) is a bank of resources and professional learning modules designed to support schools to: address the causes of student absence in their local context; engage their communities to support and promote school attendance; and set targets and monitor student attendance trends at their school.

The purpose of the Toolkit is to provide schools with resources to support their efforts in encouraging and promoting student attendance.

Given this purpose, monitoring of the Toolkit has and will focus on the extent to which schools report that the Toolkit resources are useful and meaningful in the context of meeting their requirements in the context of student attendance.
5. What is the status of the Better Attendance: Bright Futures (BABF) program?
   a. Has it been formally evaluated?
      i. If so, when was this done and what were the results?
      ii. If not, why was no evaluation undertaken?

Better Attendance: Brighter Futures (BABF) operated from 2010 to 2012 as a set of initiatives developed in response to the recommendations of the 2009 report of the Office of the Auditor General.

BABF comprised nine key strategies for improving student attendance:
1. ensuring all children are enrolled in school;
2. giving direct support to schools and communities with the greatest need;
3. ensuring strong support and action in the early years and at transition points;
4. recognising initiatives that encourage student attendance and parent participation;
5. notifying schools early when non-attendance is a serious issue;
6. supporting parents to take responsibility for their child’s attendance at school;
7. establishing partnerships with local businesses and agencies to improve attendance;
8. providing professional learning for school staff and community members on how to address poor attendance; and
9. making regular attendance a priority across the Department.

As noted in the Auditor General’s 2015 Report, BABF was not formally evaluated. The nine strategies were very different in nature with widely varying implementation approaches and associated monitoring and data gathering. There was data collected on some individual parts of some of the measures; for example as part of point 6 above records were kept in relation to provision of the Positive Parenting Program. In contrast however, no central records were kept of partnerships established with local businesses or agencies as part of point 7.

5. How much money has the department spent on all student attendance initiatives since the roll-out of the BABF program?

It is not possible to accurately quantify the total amount spent by the Department on all attendance initiatives since the roll-out of BABF. This is because funding used to support attendance is contained within school, regional and central budget allocations and FTE, which are often not disaggregated to attendance specific activities.

7. Under the devolved funding arrangements associated with the IPS model, does the department collate data on how much schools are spending on their own attendance initiatives?

No.
8. Page 17 of the audit report states that the department now expects schools to assess their own general performance around attendance rates. What guidance does the department provide to assist schools conduct their own performance assessments?
   a. Does the department receive the information obtained from these self-assessments?
      i. If so, what does the department do with this information?

Schools are not required to provide the Department with the information obtained from these self-assessments.

The Department provides schools with extensive assistance in assessing their attendance outcomes. Multiple systems offer data and analyses at the school level by year levels, by student groups, by classroom and by individual students.

Schools Online compares attendance data to all public schools and to like-schools, and provides guidance in relation to attendance expectations.

Student Attendance Reporting (SAR) provides comprehensive attendance data and reports at student, school, region and state levels; identifies possible data errors and conflicts in school source systems; and allows schools to sign off on their verified attendance data.

Student Achievement Information System (SAIS) allows schools to associate student attendance data with other performance data such as NAPLAN and A–E grades so that the effect of attendance on student outcomes can be evaluated and interventions planned at the school, year group, classroom or individual student levels.

Online Student Information (OSI) allows schools to focus on the attendance patterns of individual students over time and associate attendance data with other performance and enrolment information.

The Student Attendance Toolkit is structured to align with the School Improvement and Accountability Framework, and includes the following five professional learning modules:
- Module 1: Student Attendance Fundamentals.
- Module 2: School Self-Assessment.
- Module 3: Data Analysis.
- Module 4: Evidence-based Practices.
- Module 5: Target Setting.

The Student Attendance Connect Community provides an online forum that facilitates clarification of student attendance requirements across schools, regions, central office and Statewide Services. The online community provides an opportunity for information to be shared in a timely manner through collegiate support and allows for any advice given to be visible to all members. The online forum is monitored by central office staff that provide clarification and guidance as appropriate.

The Student Attendance website provides support and guidance to assist schools to manage and promote student attendance, including the provision of scenarios to clarify understanding.

A key feature of the new Public School Review process will be the introduction of an electronic school assessment tool for schools to use in their ongoing self-assessment and reflective practices. The tool identifies data sources and provides links to evidence with a view to elevating schools' awareness of and attention to data.

Student attendance monitoring, planning and reporting will feature as part of the school's self-assessment submission.
9. How does the department identify the schools that require assistance with effective follow up processes and procedures for managing unexplained and unauthorised absences?

The attendance rates and percentage regularly (90%+) attending for each school provide a component of School Performance Monitoring which is accessed by school principals, the Public School Accountability unit (previously the Expert Review Group) and the reviewers of Independent Public Schools. The system determines schools that are well above, above, within, below and well below an expected performance range.

Review processes of public schools undertaken by the Public School Accountability unit are based on the Department’s School Accountability and Improvement Framework. Attendance concerns and their impact on student performance are reported on as part of the Learning Environment domain. As part of the Department’s overall quality assurance measures, follow up reviews are conducted to monitor and assess the school’s progress in planning for and implementing strategies to redress concerns outlined in the findings and prescribed improvement strategies.

The Department provides schools with an extensive range of student attendance data, including attendance by risk category and attendance trends for sub-groups of students. Attendance data is also overlaid on other student achievement data, such as NAPLAN. These data are provided through secure online applications: SAR, SAIS, OSI and Schools Online. These data sources support schools to investigate attendance issues including rates of unexplained and unauthorised absences.

All schools identify and access support and assistance as needed.

10. What forms of training and assistance are provided to those schools identified as in need?

There is no specific training provided for schools identified as in need. However, there is a range of training and assistance available to all schools that they can access as they require. These include:

- The professional learning modules in the Student Attendance Toolkit
- The Student Attendance Connect Community.
- Detailed guidance on the use of Attendance Codes from the Student Attendance website.
- The Student Attendance Reporting (SAR) application.
- Staff with attendance related knowledge and expertise from Statewide Services and regional offices.
11. What processes does the department have in place to follow-up schools to determine whether the training and assistance provided to them was effective?

Schools were surveyed on the usefulness of the Student Attendance Toolkit in Term 4, 2017. Further surveys will be conducted.

Participants in formal professional learning sessions on Student Attendance are surveyed on the extent to which the sessions are useful.

12. How many schools have been identified by the department as in need of training and assistance since the audit report was tabled in August 2015?
   a) Of those identified, how many have received the necessary training and assistance?

There is no formal process for identifying schools that specifically need support in this area. In some cases, the Public School Accountability unit (formerly the Expert Review Group) has identified through their process that attendance and its impact on student performance is an area that a school needs to address.

The number of schools where attendance was identified as an issue through the Expert Review Group process is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of these schools received support to address attendance.

13. What role does the Student Services Unit (i.e. Statewide Services) play in helping schools address attendance issues?
   a) How much is budgeted annually to Student Services for this purpose?
   b) How is the effectiveness of Student Services’ performance in this area assessed?

Given legislative responsibility for ensuring that students attend school rests with parents, the Department recognises that improving student attendance can only be achieved with strong local cooperation between schools, families and their communities.

The role of the Department’s central office, regional offices, and Statewide Services is to support and assist schools to work with their communities to address the local causes of student absence. This is done through providing schools with data, tools and resources to select and adapt as deemed suitable in their particular context.

Within Statewide Services, the Student Support Services directorate, through its newly formed Student Wellbeing branch, is most directly concerned with attendance issues, though other branches and directorates also deal with attendance-related matters. Attendance data, for instance, is managed by the System and School Performance directorate of Strategic Initiative and Performance division.
Student Attendance is one of a range of portfolios within the Student Wellbeing Branch that forms part of the Statewide Services Division. The role of the branch in relation to attendance includes:

- management of the Student Attendance policy;
- maintenance of the Student Attendance Toolkit and website; and
- providing policy advice and guidance to regional office staff, and when necessary directly to individual schools.

The branch also has responsibility for a number of attendance-related functions, including management of the Students Whose Whereabouts are Unknown (SWU) data base, the badging of Attendance Officers, and reporting on the number of Attendance Panels conducted in regions.

These functions are managed across a number of staff and funded through the branches operational budget. The estimated FTE to perform these functions is 4.0 at an approximate annual cost of $450,000. The estimated operational budget associated with this FTE is $25,000. A further $273,000 funds a contract for SMS software that enables schools to automatically notify parents/carers of unexplained student absences.

The effectiveness of this work is monitored through annual reporting processes, feedback from schools, and internal performance management.

14. Did the department review its guidance to schools around the use of absence codes?

Yes. An outcome of the review was the development of the Attendance Fundamentals module in the Student Attendance Toolkit, which addresses the recommendations of the Auditor General's 2015 report in relation to absence codes.

15. Has the department updated its guidelines to ensure schools record absences in a manner consistent with what the Auditor General recommended?

Yes.
Appendix Four

Committee’s functions and powers

The Public Accounts Committee inquires into and reports to the Legislative Assembly on any proposal, matter or thing it considers necessary, connected with the receipt and expenditure of public moneys, including moneys allocated under the annual Appropriation bills and Loan Fund. Standing Order 286 of the Legislative Assembly states that:

The Committee may -

1 Examine the financial affairs and accounts of government agencies of the State which includes any statutory board, commission, authority, committee, or trust established or appointed pursuant to any rule, regulation, by-law, order, order in Council, proclamation, ministerial direction or any other like means.

2 Inquire into and report to the Assembly on any question which -
   a) it deems necessary to investigate;
   b) (Deleted V. & P. p 225, 18 June 2008);
   c) is referred to it by a Minister; or
   d) is referred to it by the Auditor General.

3 Consider any papers on public expenditure presented to the Assembly and such of the expenditure as it sees fit to examine.

4 Consider whether the objectives of public expenditure are being achieved, or may be achieved more economically.

5 The Committee will investigate any matter which is referred to it by resolution of the Legislative Assembly.