



EDUCATION AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mrs RN Menkens MP (Chair)
Mr SA Bennett MP
Mr MA Boothman MP
Mr MR Latter MP
Ms A Palaszczuk MP
Mr MJ Pucci MP
Mr NA Symes MP

Staff present:

Ms B Watson (Research Director)
Ms E Booth (Principal Research Officer)

BRIEFING—AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT TO PARLIAMENT NO. 1 FOR 2012—IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 20 JUNE 2012

Brisbane

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Committee commenced at 9.35 am

GRANTHAM, Ms Julie, Director-General, Department of Education, Training and Employment

HUNT, Mr Jeff, Assistant Director-General, Corporate Strategy and Performance, Department of Education, Training and Employment

STEVENSON, Ms Hayley, Director, Operations and Reviews, Department of Education, Training and Employment

CHAIR: Good morning. I particularly welcome officials from the Department of Education, Training and Employment: Ms Julie Grantham, the Director-General, Mr Jeff Hunt, the Assistant Director-General, Corporate Strategy and Performance, and Ms Hayley Stevenson, Director, Operations and Reviews. The department officials are here today to brief us in respect of issues raised in the Auditor-General's *Report to parliament No. 1 for 2012—improving student attendance*, tabled on 17 May 2012. I would also like to thank the department for responses to our last briefing and to table those responses today at this meeting.

I would like to introduce the members of the Education and Innovation Committee. I am Rosemary Menkens, the member for Burdekin and chair of this committee and with me are the committee members. To my left, we have Steve Bennett, the member for Burnett; we have Neil Symes, the member for Lytton; we have Ms Anastacia Palaszczuk, the Leader of the Opposition and member for Inala; Mr Michael Pucci, the member for Logan; Mr Michael Latter, the member for Waterford; and Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Albert.

As a portfolio committee of the Queensland parliament, one of our roles is, as elected representatives of the Queensland people, to consider Auditor-General reports relevant to this committee. The briefing today will inform our examination of the Auditor-General's report and any further steps we might decide to take in respect of informing our report back to parliament. Before we start, I would remind you that parliamentary privilege applies to all committee operations, including this briefing. On the other hand, to mislead the parliament, including this committee proceeding, is a serious offence. If you are unable or unwilling to provide an answer to any question that the committee might put to you, you should advise me accordingly, giving your reasons. We will consider the reasons and provide ample opportunity for you to seek any advice or assistance you need. You might also wish to take questions on notice if you do not have information to hand. As well, you may request that any material you provide be kept private. Again, the committee will consider that request.

The briefing today is being broadcast live via the Queensland parliament website. The briefing is also being recorded and will be transcribed by Hansard. Transcripts are generally published on the committee's web page when they become available. I am not sure that media is present today, but I certainly would advise members of the media who might be recording any proceedings that they adhere to the committee's endorsed media guidelines. The committee staff have a copy of the guidelines available if they require it. I would remind everyone present to either turn off their mobile phones or set them to silent.

Ms Grantham, Mr Hunt and Ms Stevenson, the committee is very interested in the issues raised in the Auditor-General's report and the advice that you have for us in relation to these issues. Are you happy for us to ask you any questions at the end of the briefing?

Ms Grantham: Absolutely.

CHAIR: For the benefit of Hansard, can I ask the witnesses to please state their name and their positions the first time they speak. Thank you very much. I hand over to you, Ms Grantham.

Ms Grantham: My name is Julie Grantham. I am the Director-General of the Department of Education, Training and Employment. It is our great pleasure to be here to brief the committee on the follow-up, I understand, from the Auditor-General, who presented details of his report at your last hearing. So we are responding to Auditor-General's *Report to parliament No. 1 for 2012—improving student attendance* and we have, as you have acknowledged, had that report for approximately a month.

Could I make some opening remarks and provide some context and then, as I said, I am very happy for questions to be directed to me or to my colleagues. Could I ask the committee to note that we have had the report for one month and there is already work underway. We have developed an action plan to respond to each of the recommendations as identified by the Auditor-General, but we are still working through some of the issues that were raised in the report. Can I start by saying that the issue of school Brisbane

attendance is one that sparks broad community interest and that the department was pleased to work with officers from the Auditor-General's office on this performance audit topic. I acknowledge the work that the officers of the QAO have done in bringing the report together and also the school principals and officers from the department who assisted the QAO during the conduct of that audit process.

The department saw this audit as an opportunity to have an external review of the systems and the processes it had in place and an opportunity to promote and strengthen parent, student and school community understanding of the importance of school attendance. As you are aware, under the terms of the audit scope set by the Auditor-General, the audit assessed whether the strategies and the initiatives to increase attendance had been effective and they examined the department's approach, policy, guidelines and support for schools as well as the monitoring and reporting of student attendance by state schools and the department.

It is important to note for the committee that the non-government schools were not within the scope of this audit. The overarching assessment made by the Auditor-General in this report is that the department's strategies and initiatives have not been effective and that judgement was made on the basis that the state-wide attendance rate has remained stable at 91 per cent since the department's Every Day Counts initiative commenced in 2008. Therefore, we have not achieved the improvements as set out as our own aspiration. Interestingly—and the committee could note—most state and territory government school attendance rates have also remained stable. The audit made no findings about the effectiveness of the Every Day Counts strategy in promoting school attendance, but, with 100 per cent of school principals indicating in the Queensland Audit Office survey that they rated school attendance as important or very important in their school, the strategy not only has brand recognition but has emphasised the issue and importance of school attendance for schools and their communities.

It is important here to be clear about the legislative provisions that apply to student attendance and the degree to which the department can directly impact or influence the attendance rate. The Auditor-General was very clear that the primary obligation for school attendance resides with parents. The Auditor-General's report sends a powerful message to parents—not just to remind all parents that they are legally obliged to ensure that their children attend school every day and every possible school day, but, more importantly, that every day missed can contribute to lowering a student's learning outcomes, behaviour issues, social exclusion, lower school completion rates, et cetera. The powers under the Education (General Provisions) Act clearly place the onus on parents to ensure that their children attend school each school day unless there is a legitimate and responsible excuse. Queensland is no different in this regard from other states and territories. All states recognise that parents have the primary responsibility for ensuring that their child goes to school and it is an offence if a parent fails in this obligation or duty. All states are in agreement that prosecution is used as a last resort.

In Queensland, the Education (General Provisions) Act chapter 9 outlines a parent's obligation and that is—

(1) Each parent of a child who is of compulsory school age must —

(a) ensure the child is enrolled at a State school or non-State school; and

(b) ensure the child attends the State school or non-State school, on every school day, for the educational program in which the child is enrolled;

unless the parent has a reasonable excuse.

These compulsory school-age provisions apply until the child turns 16, or completes year 10—whichever is sooner—and, under the Act, further provisions apply to senior secondary students requiring them to be in the compulsory participation phase until they gain senior certificate, a certificate III or certificate IV, have participated in an eligible option for two years since ceasing to be of compulsory school, or they turn 17. Across the country, legislation recognises that parents have the primary responsibility for ensuring their child goes to school and it is an offence if they fail in this obligation of duty. With that background, I now turn to the Auditor-General's report in some detail.

In all, the Auditor-General's report made six recommendations arising through the audit. They can be broadly grouped under six headings: improved guidance materials, additional monitoring tools, expanded access to resources, reviewing the effectiveness of enforcement provisions, increased public reporting and improved data management. The department has fully or partially accepted the Auditor-General's recommendations and has undertaken a range of actions to either implement the recommendations or to explore further aspects of these recommendations where further investigation is needed to be considered or required. Since receiving the Auditor-General's report, as I said, the department has developed a detailed action plan to address each recommendation.

The audit noted that this is a challenging area of school operations and found that, while the overall attendance rates of some schools improved, others declined which highlights the challenge of improving the overall attendance rate when there are so many factors that apply differently across the state. For example, over one-year and three-year time frames, attendance rates are slightly down in Far North Queensland, North Queensland, Darling Downs and South-West Queensland, but these were all areas affected by severe weather conditions in recent times. In three other education regions—South-East, Metro and North Coast—the three-year time series to 2011 shows an overall improved attendance rate over this time. Meanwhile, Central Queensland's overall attendance rate remained static over that three-year period.

The report also identified that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance was not closing at the rate we set as our target. The gap has narrowed slightly over the past three years. From 2009 to 2011, the Indigenous attendance rate increased from 83.9 per cent to 84.5 per cent, where the non-Indigenous rate increased by 0.1 per cent over the same period.

At the school level, the report found that schools generally are performing well in the area of attendance monitoring, with all schools visited having processes in place. But there is room for some refinement of practice and the report recommended the provision of additional support materials to schools to assist them in their work. A major thread of the Auditor-General's recommendations was in relation to establishing a minimum standard or a threshold at which nonattendance becomes unsatisfactory. The report does not specify the penalties or sanctions that should apply when such a threshold is crossed and this aspect of the audit, defining a level of unsatisfactory attendance, is one recommendation with which the department has some concerns regarding the unintended consequence.

I give an example: if we set the threshold at 90 per cent, what we are saying to parents is that it is okay to send children to school nine out of 10 days. That is not acceptable. That is what the report is recommending: identify a threshold. Our threshold is 100 per cent unless there are exceptional circumstances. That notion, as identified in the Auditor-General's report, potentially excuses nonattendance to a certain level. Reference was made to the 90 per cent threshold in the Auditor-General's report and that is why, as a deputy, as a teacher, as a parent we do not support that threshold being identified.

The department's analysis of the relationship between attendance and learning outcomes suggests that every day counts, hence, the department's attendance strategy by the same name. I think we can deal with the intent, though, of the Auditor-General's recommendations in other ways in how we support school monitoring processes. I did note that, when the Auditor-General presented to the committee last week, he stated that he had identified that local actions seemed to produce positive results and it was necessary to treat students as individuals and to manage them as individuals and not as an average. I think that is what he said. The implementation of an arbitrary level or a classification may be counter productive to that case management approach that he was referring to and which schools currently use, that is, the case management approach.

We know that there are a wide variety of reasons that contribute to school attendance issues for young people. It could be transport, family issues, health, medical. Schools use a range of resources that they have available to them—guidance officers, youth support coordinators, teachers, principals, deputy principals, school based police officers and school based nurses—to best support individual students. In some cases, we do involve external organisations. These efforts are all focused on maximising individual student attendance through that case management approach.

The report identified that the department has in place and references statewide policies, procedures and resources to guide schools in recording and managing absences. But in one of the conclusions, it is suggested that there is no statewide strategy to improve student attendance. There clearly is. This is one aspect of the report that the department did contest with the QAO when we saw the report, given that we not only have legislation, policy and guidelines in place, but we also require schools to set aspirational targets to lift student attendance and require them to report on student attendance rates in their annual reports, and we provide them with reports on the levels of attendance achieved and a system to record and integrate their data, and to interrogate their data as well. There are support materials on the web and process documents to guide that practice.

The combination of these elements, we believe, constitutes a clear statewide strategy and schools certainly consider, plan and monitor student attendance as part of their operational and strategic planning activities. We did note that principals in the QAO survey indicated that, while they placed high importance on the issue of school attendance and that they overwhelmingly believed that their strategies were helping student attendance, they would welcome additional guidance materials and we are responding to that recommendation that was raised in the report.

Quickly, I turn to the recommendations contained in the report and update the committee on the actions that we have already taken. In relation to the first recommendation, the department has already strengthened its guidance to schools about its processes for tracking and monitoring non-attendance, but is still considering the issue of a threshold at which to deem attendance unsatisfactory. We believe that through enhanced reporting functionality being made available to schools, student attendance can be bracketed and, therefore, highlighted for all schools to assist in lowering student nonattendance, particularly for those students who have a pattern of unexplained or unauthorised absence, and this also relates to the next recommendation.

The second recommendation suggested the department expand the range of reports available for monitoring. While the principals' survey showed that 95 per cent of principals were easily able to identify and monitor students with patterns of irregular attendance, the department is soon to release additional reporting tools for schools to further enhance the range of pre-existing monitoring and reporting tools available through the department's One School school administration system. This work is being conducted through Jeff Hunt's area. I am sure he will be able to provide detail for you.

Recommendation 3 recommended a broader suite of resource reference material. Additional case studies are in the process of being loaded to the Every Day Counts website, to bolster the already pre-existing resources that are available to schools.

Under recommendation 4, relating to the evaluation of enforcement provisions, the department is planning to undertake a literature search to explore national and international research, and explore with principals and regional staff their views on the effectiveness of enforcement provisions on lifting attendance. It is interesting to note that in the QAO's principals' survey, as part of this audit, only 27 per cent of principals agreed that enforcing parental obligations was effective in increasing attendance.

For recommendation 5, regarding the public reporting of low attendee data, the department has already required schools to place more information in the school annual reports for 2011 and those reports are due for publication by the end of this month. This will detail the proportion of students in each attendance rate category, so 85 per cent, 90 per cent, 95 per cent.

Finally for recommendation 6, relating to data management practices, the department has moved to have all schools on One School since Easter 2012. The data management issues are now largely addressed due to the logging and tracking functions of that application.

As I indicated earlier, the department provides schools with a range of resources, recording systems and process guidelines, template letters, et cetera, and schools communicate these expectations to the school community through their own school website, newsletters and in the school's enrolments package. As part of the school annual planning cycle, schools also consider the strategies and initiatives regarding school attendance and set an attendance improvement target in discussion with their assistant regional director, who is the principle supervisor.

Clearly, a number of factors fall outside the control of the school. The extreme weather events of the past few summers, the swine flu pandemic and even cultural events such as the Queen's visit last year all impacted on school attendance. The department expects schools to do a number of things: that they identify absences quickly, which means they mark the roll twice each day and that allows for the recording of this information; that they follow up promptly, and schools routinely call parents, either by SMS notifications or phone calls, to seek a reason for absence; that they also send clear messages to students and parents that attendance is vital.

Guidelines for schools indicate that a school should identify unexplained or unsatisfactory absences or patterns of absence. When a student is absent for three or more consecutive days, a trigger occurs. Where there is a persistent pattern of unexplained absences or absences without reasonable excuses, there is a trigger. Where a student's attendance is reasonably considered unsatisfactory by the principal, action is taken. One significant challenge for schools, which is highlighted in the report, is that a large number of absences are unexplained, that is, that parents have not provided information relating to the reason for student absences. While schools make reasonable attempts to ascertain the reason from parents, they cannot be consumed by chasing explanations from parents who are not forthcoming with such information.

I think there is a lot of positive and affirming information in the audit for the state schooling system. The high priority the principals place on student attendance, the fact that principals find the process information easy to follow and to use, the use of innovative technologies such as SMS messaging to keep in contact with parents, the case management approaches that are performed by schools, the local strategies to incentivise and reward students for improved attendance are examples of what occurs. As I said at the outset, this report not only provides us with process feedback, but also reminds the broader Queensland community that school attendance is critical to the success of our young people.

Can I say, in concluding, that the report has been a useful piece of work for the department to confirm a number of directions that it was already taking in terms of policy and reporting work underway at the time of the audit and a shaping piece of work for the department to consider the adequacy of aspects of the current policy settings. What the department must also consider in framing its response is the potential impact of recommendations on schools. Attendance, while vitally important, is but one of the many issues that schools deal with on a daily basis. We want our teachers focused on boosting the learning of our students and our administration resources to support that effort. We need students and their parents to play their part in ensuring that the school attendance is maximised.

As I said earlier, the report is still relatively new and officers from the department will continue to further consider, investigate and, where appropriate, implement the recommendations contained in it. We will work with internal and external stakeholders as necessary to shape our ongoing work. Can I thank the committee for taking time to consider the report and I am very happy to take questions.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Grantham. I certainly am aware of your department's concerns over this particular issue, because it is an important issue. The Auditor-General's report, the performance report, found that outputs generally that were designed to identify and support the management of student attendance were not improving the student attendance rates, which you have outlined very well to us. At a local level, some strategies do work and were found to have an impact, but the report finds that there is a lack of systemic strategies right across the board. Would you like to comment further on that? I am aware that there are varying factors in each case.

Ms Grantham: During my opening comments I said that we believe we do have a state-wide strategy and approach. As you say, that cannot be consistently and wholeheartedly applied because then we get into communities where different community factors actually influence what is happening. Individuals and their families change an attendance pattern and obviously, whether it is a state-wide strategy or not, we cannot actually get into a home where the real change would happen. But we have lots of schools that have outstanding programs, and they are programs that are based on great relationships with the community—where a community actually embraces the concept that every student in their community should be in school and the community works together to actually ensure that that happens. I am just thinking of the Logan area where there has been some great cooperation between the school based police officers, the various government departments, the local community and the shop owners. Everyone is saying, 'We're not going to serve a child who is in school uniform or of school age when they come in during school time.' When those sorts of communities work together, we see improved results, because everyone is aware that school attendance is the priority in that community. So I know that we have seen various examples, and communities work differently and they are all responding to local context. Hayley or Jeff might have other examples, but that is just one example that comes to mind with the Logan area because I have seen that one firsthand. I was principal for a day at Beenleigh State High School last year. We walked the shops and I talked to the shopkeepers about how they play their role. It is that sort of thing that you see in action where the whole community embraces the concept and actually supports the school in its efforts to ensure that attendance is maximised.

CHAIR: As you say, different communities in different areas do work differently. There is a very large notice in my office that says, 'School's in'. We certainly notice in the arcade when students are walking through, and I have to say that my staff have reported different issues to the school when we observe this. I know that the other businesses do too, but it cannot work in all areas because it is just an impossibility.

Ms Grantham: There was an excellent article in the *Courier-Mail* on Saturday about Cunnamulla where we were very concerned about the attendance rate. We sent a turnaround team into the community, interviewed 400 families and parents and talked about the importance of making sure children were at school. That community recognised that attendance was important but did not realise that if you went seven days out of the 10 by the time you get to year 10 you have done seven years of schooling and that is where your educational outcome will be at. So we tried to point out in practical ways to families about the implications of nonattendance. When you relayed it in simple examples like that, then people say, 'How can I be expected to be at year-10 standard if I've only gone to school for the equivalent of seven years?' It is a very stark example of what can happen. There are some excellent practices happening in different types of communities, but the best results we get are where everyone works together. Hayley, did you have any other examples?

Ms Stevenson: There are some other examples, I guess, that are tailored to specific school communities. So some school communities have really taken on the communication with parents through multiple means. So we see some schools on their Facebook pages and on their websites regularly reminding parents about the importance of attending every single school day right up until the end of the term. We also, as the director-general mentioned, have attendance improvement teams in a number of sites across Queensland. So that is where we have our youth support coordinators, guidance officers and school based police officers working together to assist families to overcome those barriers to getting their child to school each day. We also see some examples of proactive schemes for rewarding good attendance that have been particularly effective across schools. I am particularly thinking of Mabel Park State High School that has seen tremendous improvement in their attendance. They have a strategy of rewarding students where students calculate their attendance rate and there are particular rewards throughout the year for that improvement in attendance. So we do see the schools work with their communities, understand their student cohort and try to work out their local strategies that best meet their student needs.

Ms Grantham: I was in Mount Isa recently and in one school classroom the teacher had everyone's name up and how many weeks they had attended every day. So that was that school's interpretation of how to talk to children—that is, every day they were reminded that attendance is important because their little charts would go up with each day attendance. There are various emphasises but everyone is willing to make sure that we actually maximise every strategy to ensure that we can get the very best for the children.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. We will now go to questions from the committee.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Thank you very much for your overview this morning. I am interested in Mabel Park, because it seems to be a bit of a showcase. Is the department giving any consideration to looking at what is happening there and maybe replicating that throughout the state?

Ms Stevenson: We already have on the department's website under the Every Day Counts website pages a number of case studies that outline the range of local strategies to give schools ideas on developing their attendance plan and policy. We are looking to expand that, so, yes, we have looked at Mabel Park. There are a number of great works happening across the state, so we are now tapping into those and writing those case studies up so that we can place them on the website and direct our schools to them through the policy so that they can tailor their local approach after seeing what has worked in other areas.

Ms Grantham: One thing that is important is that a school adopts the strategies that work for their community, and one of the things we try to steer away from is saying, 'Everyone will do this,' because it works differently in different communities. So we do not actually say, 'You must'. We say, 'Here are the ideas. Sit down with your community, talk about what will work for you and adopt what you think can work,' rather than be the dictatorial central office that is always commanding and controlling. Having the community own their own strategies is a far more effective approach than to determine an outcome for a school.

Ms PALASZCZUK: When the Auditor-General addressed us last time he was quite positive towards the idea of having case managers following up individually with the students who were impacted. What sort of resourcing impact would that have on the department?

Ms Grantham: We have not modelled that and I do not know if you have, Jeff.

Mr Hunt: With regard to the case management approach, as I think I mentioned to the committee last time I met with you about this topic, when I visited one of the eight schools that the Auditor-General's team went out to for the purpose of the audit that school—and it was cited in the report itself—took an approach to student management in that case management approach. I think that that is typically the way that we would see all schools dealing with this issue—through the marking of the rolls and through the identification of individual students who come up on the reports that are available to schools, to the deputy principal, the principal, the guidance officer, the police officer and all of those resources that are available to schools typically. In particular, the school that I visited, Albany Creek State High School, had a case management team that looked at that data with a view to identifying what are the appropriate strategies, what were the interventions, what were the causes behind individual student nonattendance so that the right approach was taken for those students.

In terms of additional resources—and it is only emerging, as the director-general said, in terms of looking at what else is happening elsewhere—there are some other jurisdictions that have other resource packages in place, but some of those are found to be burdensome by schools and some of the feedback around some of those strategies is that the best sort of case management approach is the local case management approach because there is the connection to the student, there is the connection to the family and there is the connection to the local resources that are available in that particular community.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Yes, and there is some really good work happening out at Inala as well. I want to commend the department for their work out there. I have just a couple more questions. Just in relation to class sizes, what is the standard class size for state schools for primary and high school?

Ms Grantham: I can answer that. This is Jeff's area, but I can answer that. In P-3 it is 25, in grades 4 to 10 it is 28 and in grades 11 and 12 it is 25. Could I just say the class sizes are a target. As a principal, if I had 30 students who wanted to do physics—for example, bright, clever kids—I would not create two classes of 15. With an experienced teacher highly qualified in science, I would make a decision to say that, rather than split that, I will have 30 in that class but I might only then have 20 in a class that is struggling with science. So we use the class sizes as a target, but we actually then enable principals to make decisions that best suit them at that school. For example, in terms of prep classes, obviously we would love kids to come in bundles of 25 so that you have a straight prep class. It does not happen. But if you have 26 you would not create a composite class necessarily for the one extra student. You would probably put 26 in the prep class. So we are not rigid about how we approach that. We allow for principals to make the right decisions that they do for their children.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Sorry, but could you just repeat those numbers again?

Ms Grantham: Yes. Prep to 3 is 25, grades 4 to 10 is 28 and grades 11 and 12 is 25, and they are targets.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Finally, noticing school attendance and that different regions have their own unique issues, if class sizes were expanded, say, to 28 or 30, what impact would that have on teachers?

Ms Grantham: The Productivity Commission's report recently released says that class size cannot be measured as having an impact. But what we all know as educators is that, if you want to individualise your teaching, then—

Ms PALASZCZUK: Small is better.

Ms Grantham: Yes, small is better. So it depends. It depends on the class. As I said, a class of 30 in physics would not be hard, but a class of 20 children who have learning difficulties means it is then more difficult for the teacher to individualise the learning. So it is about the teacher and their experience and it is about the make-up of the class. It is situational. I guess that is what I am trying to say.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Thank you.

Mr PUCCI: Thank you for the brief today. It was, as always, very well done. My question is about principal turnover. If you could tell me the average time principals stay in the school for primary and high school and if there is any correlation between principal turnover and student attendance as far as links there.

Ms Grantham: There would be, again, a difference in the times that principals stay. I will talk about the length of time, and I am not sure that Jeff's area has done any work on the impact of that. We know that in smaller country communities principals will stay. Their family will reside in that area and they might stay in a community for 20 years. We try to make it a minimum of two years, so we ask principals to stay in Brisbane

certain locations for two years before they seek either a promotion or a relocation to another school. So we try to make two years a minimum. That has not always worked. I am not going to sit here and say that that has been achieved every time, but we have some evidence of principals who stay at schools for a long time. Principals in the early stages of their career as they are looking to move through to promotional positions to get to the highest level of principalship will have a range of experiences at different sized schools before they settle at a certain sized school and remain there as a principal. So it is very different. Sometimes more challenging schools have a higher turnover, and I would imagine that you would be talking from local experience in that there are some areas of your community that are challenging communities. But I can say that we have some wonderful principals in your schools who are really doing a fantastic job. I do not know if Jeff can add if we have done any analysis.

Mr Hunt: No, we have not looked at the direct correlations between principal turnover and attendance. I guess that could be a positive or a negative correlation depending on the strategies et cetera. I think, as the Director-General outlined, and as the Auditor-General said the other day, the local approaches to attendance behaviour and the strategies that are in schools are not only the work of the principal but of the school community more broadly. P&C associations are as heavily involved in setting the behavioural expectations and processes in place such as the rewards and incentive schemes. Of course, often they are party to the funding of those sorts of arrangements as well. The short answer is no, we have not done that particular work.

Mr PUCCI: Thank you, that answers my question. I just want to know about the turnover because I know as new principals come in things change. If there are strategies that keep track of attendance, in communities, plans or schemes that do that, if it is changing with each principal then it is hard to do that.

Ms Grantham: Exactly. That is why it is important that the community is involved, because if the community has strength in owning the strategies our principals will see that is what is working here, why change something that is already working. You asked about the analysis. Jeff's area has done some interesting work on students who have a high absence rate earlier and the correlation with whether they complete school, whether they are successful or whether they are suspended or excluded from school. There is some very good work on that. I do not know if the committee would be interested in exploring that further, but that work has been done. I do not think you would be surprised to know that where we have poor attendance in those early years it does impact. So we can actually show parents that if this attendance pattern continues your child has a higher likelihood of not completing school, not getting qualifications, ending up in trouble—you know, kids who are not well occupied, in shopping centres shoplifting—and exhibiting unwelcome behaviours. We know that that can translate. I do not know if you are interested in that, but Jeff can talk on that if you are.

Mr PUCCI: I am always interested in anything we can find out about this. Just one more question in relation to principals. Two years being the minimum, can you tell us the main reasons or are there any main reasons for people leaving? Is it promotions or is it needs in other schools? When there are temporary principals are there set times that the temporary or acting principals have to be there before a new principal comes in?

Ms Grantham: I will answer the last bit first because that is an easier part of the question. If a principal goes off on sick leave then we put a temporary principal behind that person. Hopefully that does not go on too long. But we know that with some illnesses it can go on. But that person is hopeful to return to their position. They are the principal of that school and so we respect that they are that principal and will return. Sometimes you cannot say. We might start out to say someone is having chemotherapy for three months, something is happening, but we expect them to be back. We will hold that position in a temporary capacity. It is when it looks like extending beyond that that we may have a conversation with the principal about relinquishing that principalship so that we could fill it permanently. It depends on the circumstance in that case. But there is never a hard and fast rule. Long service and holidays are usually the more predictable, but illness or family circumstance are the more challenging. In those sorts of instances it is a bit more difficult. To answer your first question, we could not categorically say it is because of promotion. Sometimes in some parts of Queensland there are less favourable locations and principals may say, 'I will go for two years because I don't want my family to be disadvantaged' or 'I want my children to have Saturday sport or go to a bigger school'. People make decisions for all sorts of reasons. Our guideline is that if you go to a location, you go for two years. What we are finding though in some of the more difficult locations is that people are staying longer. It is not something where we can say this is the trend but we are finding pockets where that is happening.

Mr PUCCI: Last question, I promise. Where there are schools that have these transit turnovers in principal—for example, I have one school that has had six principals in five years—does the department look at that and say okay, maybe that is a place where we need to put a contract in place for four years like you do in low SES areas?

CHAIR: With respect, Michael, I do believe our questions are getting very far away from the terms of reference, even though I really do appreciate your answers, Julie. I perhaps would ask the committee to direct the questions more to the terms of reference that we are particularly interested in looking at.

Ms Grantham: I am happy to talk off record.

CHAIR: I do have to say that education is an area that we are all vitally interested in and I know that is why we are drifting into further areas.

Ms Grantham: And we are very pleased about that, chair, that people are as interested in this as us.

CHAIR: Our time is limited. We may invite you back at other times to look into these areas further. I ask other members if they have some further questions? In fact, I know we do have lots of further questions that we would like to ask along the terms of reference.

Mr BENNETT: Going back to individual schools and student attendance, I was curious if the department has opinions around some of the more controversial—or what may seem in the local community controversial—senior school rewards such as end of school functions linked to their attendance? I was curious about the department's thoughts on their success and is there any thought to these being generically rolled out?

Ms Grantham: We are always looking to identify something that works. The work that Hayley referred to earlier where we write the case studies, we actually record that and publish it, but we also encourage principals to talk locally about what is working because how schools and principals network and cluster together is actually where we see the greatest examples of the sharing of good practice. It is easy to read about something, but it is then translating or listening to someone talk about what does that look like in my school and what are the things we have done and how have I been clever in resourcing that or making sure that the whole community is involved and what were the strategies. So I think when people talk in their clusters, which they do, because every year we know that our schools are planning and asking how do I improve this. They look at all this data that they see and they know the importance of getting that attendance rate up. They talk to their colleagues, to each other, look at the research and talk to their community. Actually, I believe the community is the strongest part of this linkage. We are always very happy to share and to ensure that people can see that there are different ways of doing things because sometimes you get to the point where you think okay, well, I have tried that, is it working? Let us assess it. Is there something else different that we can look at to bring in and make part of our practice that can give us that further boost.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I want to thank the department for doing a fantastic job in the Albert schools. I was certainly very impressed when I went around to them. Hayley did mention online technologies such as Facebook. Is it going to be a centralised approach from the department? I was quickly checking some of my local schools and quite a fair few of them did not have any Facebook sites or anything like that. They are a great medium as a bulletin board service. Is there any centralised approach that the department is going to undertake?

Ms Grantham: What we do is we say to schools if you want this, here is the support and how to go about doing it. So again we do not say you must, we say here is an opportunity and we assist them in how to set it up, how to manage it and how to make sure that it captures the information. It is the same with their websites. Schools can work with the department about how a website is appealing to parents, how it has good categorisation of information and accessibility so people are not sitting there for ages trying to find something. We actually give advice on how to go about doing something and doing it well rather than directing and saying that you must do this. We do not do that.

Mr Hunt: If I could add to that, the department also, through its communications and marketing area, provides template newsletter articles and feeds to schools for use on their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds, if they are using those, and they adopt those in a whole range of ways. I was driving past Bundamba State School last week and one of the feeds that we had sent as part of the newsletter article on promotion of attendance, particularly at this time of the term, was up on their electronic noticeboard out the front. I thought it was a wonderfully powerful tool just to have that flashing billboard basically where thousands of cars a day stop and see the slogan, 'It is not okay to be away. Any day that you are away you need to provide a reasonable excuse to the school'. There are a whole range of multichannelled communication feeds that we are supporting schools with. Twitter, Facebook and the traditional website and newsletter media are certainly those that are used by many schools.

Ms Grantham: I guess it is hard when you have a small school. I am just thinking of Cedar Creek and some of those little schools compared to Upper Coomera and their ability to communicate with a small community and then the bigger communities as well. I guess that is why we do not say you must all do this, because we are aware that some schools with five or three children would not need that sort of medium whereas another school would need them all and would want as many avenues as possible.

Mr SYMES: My question is directed to Julie. In 2006 Queensland truancy laws changed to double the penalties for parents who do not meet their obligations to send their children to school. The law also changed to require students to be either at school, in a training program or employed until the age of 17 years. Previously students could not leave school until the age of 15. The data in the A-G report suggests that year 10, which would be at this age group, had the lowest attendance of any year level. My main question is would the legal process targeting parents ever be used with older students, say 16 years of age? My follow up question would be does the data show that the overall attendance rates are lower because of the impact of the age cohort?

Ms Grantham: Jeff might have the exact data. There have not been a lot of prosecutions. The delegation to prosecute is mine. In 2009 I think I did six, five the next year, six again. So we try to use prosecution as the measure of last resort because by then the situation is dire. That means we have failed in all our attempts to work with parents and to strategise. It is interesting that the member raises year 10. It is a year of real crossroads for young people. That is why we really look at how do we engage the students

through the curriculum. More and more we are looking at what is the pathway for you as an individual student into senior schooling. Queensland has the highest number of school based vocational education and training traineeships and apprenticeships than any other state. We have 45 per cent of the nation's school based apprenticeships and traineeships. That is because we are using those as an avenue and an option to further engage young people to ensure they stay in a field of study because it is so important to keep them engaged. You are right: with the change of the law we did correlate that a certificate of education at year 12 level is equivalent to a cert 3 qualification in vocational education and training. We have tried to make sure that we accommodate the needs of students to give them every opportunity that is possible to keep them engaged in schooling and learning. If we say that every child is an academic child we all know that is not the case. For us it is about making sure we provide a broad range of options and opportunities to ensure that students are engaged in learning in some way. In terms of the prosecutions I think I am right in those numbers.

Mr Hunt: It is on page 30 of the report of the Auditor-General in terms of the enforcement and prosecution work that has been initiated by the department over the last three years, 2009 to 2011. The other thing I would say is, as the Auditor-General I think briefed the committee only last week, the year 8, 9, 10 attendance phenomenon that is present in Queensland is not common to Queensland, it is a phenomenon that is present across all jurisdictions across the country. All jurisdictions, as we are, are working hard to ensure that, as the Director-General said, they have the range of programs available to ensure that students are connected with schooling. Schools are doing a very good job in terms of the transitions. The National Partnerships on Youth Attainment and Transitions work that Queensland is involved in is certainly focused in part in that transition area between when students are legally able to leave school under our legislation and what pathways they go into for that compulsory participation phase until they turn 17. Schools are very mindful of that. We conduct an Early School Leavers survey each year and provide that information back to schools. Those are the students who have left between year 10 and year 12 and we also conduct the Next Step survey each year which provides the results of the transitions of young people who have completed year 12 and what destinations they have moved to in the six months after leaving school. So there is quite a lot of focus in that area in terms of making sure that there are the right transitional support pathways not only post transition but also in the process of that transition.

Mr LATTER: I am going to go back to the dreaded benchmarking of satisfactory/unsatisfactory attendance at schools. I thank the department—thank you, Julie—for giving a reasonable account of the Education Department's position on that. What I am interested to know is, have any other jurisdictions set benchmarks and, if so, has it had a successful outcome or not?

Ms Grantham: I cannot answer that.

Mr Hunt: I think in this issue—and perhaps when I was last before the committee it is what we and the nature of the discussions with the Auditor-General focused on—when we are talking about the recommendations as the department has interpreted them from the Auditor-General, their desire is to set a definition and a threshold. Arguably, the department has already taken steps and has for some years. I think it is mentioned in the report that we talk about, in part, and we report to schools the number and proportion of students that are attending school less than 85 per cent of the time. So schools already have provided to them information about that particular threshold. In some of our policy documents, and I think this was part of the genesis of the Auditor-General's recommendation, in part of our policy work we quoted some research that talked about chronic absenteeism. I think that was the phrase used in the research. The exact wording was 'variously described as' absences greater than 10 per cent. It was 'variously described as'. There is a range of opinion around what is the threshold at which actually attendance or non-attendance becomes unsatisfactory, if you like. As the director-general said, we are still working through the policy impacts of this. But we already report to schools in terms of the number of students below the 85 per cent threshold. We are up-front saying, 'Schools, you need to be paying attention to the students that are not having that higher than 85 per cent attendance rate,' so there is a flag there. The policy work already notes the 90 per cent threshold, so that is almost like a watching brief.

What we are doing in terms of providing to schools—and I think the director-general in her opening remarks also said—is that in the school annual report that is due out by the end of the month, there will be a graphical display of the proportion of students in each of the attendance baskets, as from 85 to 90, 91 to 95, 96 to 100 and so on. We are strengthening it. One of the other Auditor-General's recommendations was to strengthen the public engagement, if you like, around the issue of attendance or nonattendance.

To work from the legislation, the legislation is clear: it is a parental responsibility first. We want kids attending every possible school day unless there is a valid and reasonable excuse. Anything beyond that, we are saying we need to maximise the student attendance because there is a relationship between attendance and student learning outcomes. The way that I think the department can respond or perhaps at the present time—and I will put that caveat on it—is considering responding to that particular recommendation is by strengthening the reporting that is available to schools about the students that are in those various baskets.

I think the Auditor-General also clearly points out, and when he met with the committee earlier certainly indicated, that this is a case based individual localised story. With the story of Albany Creek State High School, which I referred to earlier, their attendance rates sat around 95 per cent on average, but there were still students that were below that level. Their attendance and their watching brief, if you like, over their students might be a very different distribution across those attendance baskets than other schools

that might have a lower spread of attendance across the school. In the response to the Auditor-General, we are providing schools with much more intuitive reporting so that they can get a calendar view of an individual student, so they can see by the reason type, they can see the day-by-day view and they can see what days are particularly nonattendance days. It is quite topical that we are meeting this week as we lead up to school holidays, as this is a period where non-attendance increases as parents take advantage of cheaper flights in the shoulder season and so forth. It is all those sorts of things.

The arbitrary setting of an unsatisfactory threshold is perhaps a simplistic response, in our view, in that it is not just about the overall attendance; it is the make-up of the attendance that is of focus. Unauthorised and unexplained absences might take a greater priority than holiday or illness or other. Again, it is about a case based approach, which the member for Inala spoke about earlier, in terms of that is the way that we prefer. If we go to a definition of 'unsatisfactory attendance', it might conflict with the legislation in terms of giving some 'out'—if you like—against the legislative ground for requiring parents to have their children at school. Also, it will confuse the Every Day Counts strategy that we have invested heavily in, in terms of saying every day is important and not just when you get to a certain threshold.

As I say, we are still looking at other jurisdictions. The Auditor-General referenced or looked at Western Australia, where their Auditor-General did a similar report. They have brackets like we have, but they have more broadly publicly reported them. I think there is a whole range of issues with that. As that Auditor-General's report also highlighted, we can be lulled into a false sense of security, if you like, in that if we set the bar at 90 per cent there could be a student at 89.9 per cent or 90.1 per cent who has just as great a need to be monitored or managed than the student on the other side of the threshold. That is why we prefer to stick with an identification process and a case management process, rather than some arbitrary threshold. As I say, we are still deliberating.

Ms Grantham: One of the things that I did as a principal was talk about going through school to prepare for life after school and the world of work. What I would say to students is that if you come to school nine days out of 10 or 90 per cent of the time and then translate that into work, so you turn up nine days out of 10, you are not going to be employed for a long time. In secondary schools, you have to make these real-world examples. That is not acceptable. It is not acceptable to have one day off every fortnight, at school or at work. You cannot expect to progress in a career nor can you expect to progress in your education journey if that is what you do. That is why we say it is 100 per cent. It is not negotiable unless there is a reasonable or a defensible excuse. We try and work with parents to make sure everyone understands and appreciates the implications if that is not achieved. I am quite happy for the member to receive, if we could look through other jurisdictions to see if they have set a threshold, and we would do that as part of our policy development as well. I am not familiar with any other jurisdictions setting a benchmark. I think 100 per cent is where it needs to be.

CHAIR: Thank you most sincerely for that. It is interesting. Our time certainly has come to an end. We could stay here talking for another hour and we would be very interested. The point you make that it is the community that is vital in this whole issue is so important. I do get concerned that a lot of pressure is put on schools that are trying very hard. The schools have a responsibility, but they do not have the whole responsibility. That is definitely something that we do have to pursue with the community. As a committee, we are interested in looking further into this particular report. Certainly we will be keeping in touch with you, depending on the decisions that the committee makes. We really appreciate your presence here this morning and, as I say, all of your answers. I thank you most sincerely, from the committee, for your attendance and we look forward to much further contact.

Ms PALASZCZUK: I wanted to ask a follow-up question from the tabled documents from the previous committee, where we talked about the temporary contracts. We now have the outline here that there are essentially 145 cleaners, 192 grounds persons, 2,746 teacher aides, 6,598 teachers and 12 trainees. What is the current status of those temporary employees?

Ms Grantham: In schools? Most of that category workforce are in schools. Their temporary contracts will be renewed. We are not looking at temporary contracts—

Ms PALASZCZUK: So all of the 11,488 will be renewed?

Ms Grantham: In education and in schooling, we always rely on having a temporary workforce. If a teacher is off ill for two weeks or for five days even, we have a contract teacher; even for one day we have a contract teacher. At all times, that will be just part of what we do. A teacher with a qualification is required in front of a class at all times.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Have any of these temporary employees ceased employment since 26 March?

Ms Grantham: If they are all categories of school persons, they could have ceased a temporary employment if the permanent officer, for example, returned to that job. But every job would have been filled. If it is a permanent person who is a teacher—

Ms PALASZCZUK: So it is just a backfill?

Ms Grantham: Yes, it is a backfill. That is it.

CHAIR: Thank you, Julie.

Committee adjourned at 10.42 am