

EDUCATION AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE
REPORT No.42 ON THE
REVIEW OF STATE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES
QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

INTRODUCTION

On 19 November 2014, the Education and Innovation Committee tabled Report No.42, *Review of state school attendance rates*.

The Queensland Government response to recommendations made by the Committee is provided below.

RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 – The Committee recommends that attendance rate targets be established and reported at a school and regional level, and reflect the social, economic and geographic context of that school and region.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. The Department of Education and Training (the Department) maintains that the attendance target for every student should be 100%, with recognition of absences for which there is a reasonable excuse. Establishing a threshold lower than 100% may be viewed as a tolerance of absences up to this threshold. However, the Department has created a “headline indicator” regarding student attendance rates. This indicator relates to both the proportion of students in the school who have an attendance rate of less than 85%, as well as a comparison of attendance rates with schools of the same type. Every four years, state schools update their strategic plans through a process known as the Quadrennial School Review. The School Improvement Unit conducts an annual performance assessment using the headline indicators, including student attendance which is used to designate a school, once every four years, for a review which is tailored to each school’s context and needs.

Recommendation 2 – The Committee recommends that advice about recording data in OneSchool, including the definitions of absence types, is promoted on an ongoing basis through the weekly schools update newsletter and the *Every Day Counts* website.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. Information on recording absence data will be promoted on an ongoing basis through Schools Update. The *Every Day Counts* website was updated in early 2015 with a link to the *Roll Marking in State Schools* procedure.

Recommendation 3 – The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Training report each year in its annual report the proportion of students in each attendance rate category including the less than 85% attendance category.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. Future editions of the Department’s annual report will include the proportion of students at various levels of attendance, including less than 85% attendance.

Recommendation 4 – The Committee recommends that the Government refine the *Every Day Counts* campaign to tailor it to specific groups (based on age, location or Indigenous status) with low attendance rates.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. The Department recognises that strategies to improve attendance are most successful when developed and implemented locally. Following a school review (referred to in the response to Recommendation 1), each school will work to address the resulting recommendations, which may include localised approaches to improve attendance if this is found to be an issue. The *Every Day Counts* website will be enhanced on an ongoing basis as materials (such as case studies and vignettes) in relation to improving attendance for specific groups become available.

Recommendation 5 – The Committee recommends that the Government support the development of a suite of strategies focussed on primary school children and children in the first year of secondary school and their families, to address attendance rates at the point when attendance habits are being formed.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. Queensland state schools receive funding which allows flexibility and local decision-making to implement strategies to improve attendance rates as a means of improving student outcomes. Strategies are tailored by schools to meet their individual context and will include strategies for particular year levels where this is found to be an issue. The Department will review and enhance existing *Every Day Counts* resources targeting parents of primary school students and those starting secondary school, and promote these resources on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 6 – The Committee recommends that the Government investigate ways that early childhood programs can promote attendance by increasing parent awareness of the importance of attendance, helping families overcome barriers to attendance and develop the routines for regular on-time attendance.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. The Government is committed to supporting families to access and participate in early childhood development and education. This will set the foundation for a successful transition to school and lifelong learning. The Department has implemented a suite of initiatives that address key participation challenges that families experience in attending early education programs. These include:

- creating additional kindergarten places;
- reducing out-of-pocket expenses;
- promoting opportunities for vulnerable families in areas of identified need;
- education messages through direct marketing campaigns to raise awareness of the importance, availability and affordability of kindergarten programs;
- up-skilling educators and increasing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the early childhood workforce; and
- providing access to specialised support, equipment and resources.

Recommendation 7 – The Committee recommends that the Department and individual schools implement formal arrangements for support provision with service providers such as social workers and health care providers, to enable a more targeted and holistic response to the issues of students with chronic absenteeism.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. The Department has formal arrangements in place with a number of agencies – including the Australian Government, the Queensland Police Service, the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, and Queensland Health – to respond to students with chronic absenteeism. The Department will continue to review and refine arrangements to support holistic responses to student issues on an ongoing basis. With increasing local decision-making, schools will determine the type and level of student services and support required across the school, and will allocate their resources in ways that best meet the needs of students. As schools involve other agencies and/or service providers in case management, they will document the arrangements. Families requiring further support to manage the underlying factors contributing to absenteeism can access a range of services within the school and community, including guidance officers, school-based youth health nurses, school-based police officers, and youth support coordinators.

Recommendation 8 – The Committee recommends that the Minister advise the Committee about the evaluation and reporting processes attached to the *Solid Partners Solid Futures* strategy, and particularly Phase 1 and Phase 2 initiatives.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. *Solid Partners Solid Futures* has set out Queensland’s approach for achieving excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood, school education, training and employment from 2013 to 2016. Two successes of the approach so far have been the delivery of an early childhood mentoring program which values and uses expertise of Indigenous communities, builds on local networks, and develops capabilities and best practice at a community level; and increasing access to Indigenous teaching and learning resources by creating a network of Indigenous resource centres linked to the Department’s Indigenous library. As part of *Solid Partners Solid Futures*, the Department has committed to produce an annual report against key performance indicators. School attendance is a key indicator used in the annual report in addition to assessing the progress in achieving the Phase 2 outcomes. However, given the varying levels of activity (both mainstream and Indigenous-specific) that support school attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, achievement against this indicator cannot be solely attributed to initiatives in *Solid Partners Solid Futures*.

Recommendation 9 – The Committee recommends that the Government explore options for an academically rigorous and independent evaluation of the existing strategies being implemented in Queensland (and perhaps in Australia) to identify common features that lead to success in improving school attendance rates; and identify features or strategies that may work in particular environments or with particular groups (for example, strategies for chronic absentees, for younger children, for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, for Indigenous students).

Government response – The recommendation is supported. A research report has been published by the Department on the *Every Day Counts* website highlighting trends, issues and effective strategies from literature and from Queensland state schools with high attendance growth. A principals’ survey to be conducted in 2015 will seek details on strategies used at each of the sampled schools and their perceived effectiveness. This information will provide valuable insights about which strategies are perceived by school leaders to be more effective. It will also enable analysis of survey responses relative to actual school attendance data – providing additional information that has not previously been available. Two sub-samples of schools will be surveyed, each of approximately 150 schools, based on attendance levels and improvements in attendance in recent years (restricted to those schools of at least 30 students, stratified by school type): one sub-sample with high attendance or strong improvement; and

one sub-sample, for comparison, with lower levels of attendance and lower rates of improvement. The survey would provide the first stage to inform an independent evaluation, which is anticipated to occur in 2015-2016.

Recommendation 10 – The Committee recommends that all schools enforcing parental obligations under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*:

- create the initial and warning notices in OneSchool; and
- record the outcome and effect on attendance in OneSchool.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. Using OneSchool to create notices and record outcomes associated with enforcing parental obligations regarding their child's school attendance may support efficient and accurate document production, reporting and monitoring. In 2015, enhancements will be made to OneSchool and subsequent changes will be made to the *Managing Student Absences and Enforcing Enrolment and Attendance at State Schools* procedure to reflect this change in process.

Recommendation 11 – The Committee recommends that schools be encouraged to include and action monitoring and evaluation plans as new programs or strategies are implemented; and that the evaluations are published to help develop the evidence base to support strategies to improve school attendance rates.

Government response – The recommendation is supported. From 2015, the Department will encourage schools to monitor and review new attendance improvement strategies and support the publication of relevant findings that may assist others schools with similar characteristics.

RESPONSE TO POINT FOR CLARIFICATION

Point for clarification – The Committee requests that the Minister include in the Government response to this report, advice as to the data validation queries raised.

Government response – With the attendance collection conducted through OneSchool, the Department is unable to make any adjustments to attendance data once the collection has taken place. This is in contrast to previous arrangements where all adjustments were made once the data was collected from schools. Under the new processes, central office staff check the data prior to the collection to ensure it is as complete and accurate as possible. Schools are informed of anomalies and asked to either clarify the situation or correct the data as necessary.

The anomalies checked for each individual school include:

- days of 100% attendance (especially at the end of term) which could indicate that schools have not entered their absences;
- days with 100% absence which could indicate non-school days that schools have failed to register on their school calendars through OneSchool (100% attendance days may also signify school calendar inconsistencies); and
- comparison of year-to-year movements between current attendance rate and prior year results.

Since any changes made as a result of central office validation must be made by the school prior to the collection, it is not possible to identify changes which are the result of central office validation from changes made by schools as a regular part of getting their data ready for the collection. However, centrally, the Department is able to identify whether the school has corrected the data (assuming correction was necessary) and will follow up with the school again in the lead up to the collection.

The Department has not identified systemic issues through its validation process.