



EDUCATION AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mrs RN Menkens MP (Chair)
Mr SA Bennett MP
Mr MA Boothman MP
Mr MR Latter MP
Mr TS Mulherin 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)

**PUBLIC BRIEFING BY DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT**

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 30 MAY 2012

Brisbane

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Committee met at 10.43 am

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

WHITEHEAD, Ms Annette, Deputy Director-General, Policy, Legislation and Early Childhood, Department of Education, Training and Employment

CHAIR: I would like to welcome officials from the Department of Education, Training and Employment who are joining us today to provide a briefing on the department and the portfolio areas that it administers. 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. Our deputy chair is Mr Tim Mulherin, the member for Mackay. We also have Mr Michael Pucci, the member for Logan; Mr Neil Symes, the member for Lytton; Mr Steve Burnett, the member for Burnett; Mr Michael Latter, the member for Waterford; and Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Albert. May I particularly welcome Ms Annette Whitehead, who is the Deputy Director-General of Policy, Legislation and Early Childhood and her colleague, Mr Jeff Hunt, who is the Assistant Director-General of the Department of Education, Training and Employment.

A major aim of the portfolio committee system is to ensure close alignment between the work of the committees and the work of the parliament. The intent is that portfolio committees will develop a level of expertise in their areas of responsibility through having ongoing engagement with legislation, public accounts and public works matters relating to those areas of responsibility as well as other matters referred to it by the parliament. The committee supports the parliament to meet its responsibility to scrutinise executive government. We are charged with reporting to the parliament on all of those matters so that it can make decisions on behalf of the people of Queensland.

The purpose of this briefing is to assist us to meet our part of that responsibility by increasing our understanding of the portfolio area for which we are responsible. This briefing is being recorded and will be transcribed by Hansard reporters. The intent is to publish the transcript of this briefing on the committee's web page when it is available. I ask everybody present to please turn off their mobile phones or set them to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to all committee operations, including this briefing. On the other hand, to mislead the parliament, including this committee proceedings, is a serious offence. If you are unable or unwilling to provide an answer to any question 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 on hand. As well, you may request that any material you provide be kept private and, again, the committee will consider that request. All of this is detailed in schedule 8 of the parliament's standing orders to which I believe you have been directed. Could I please ask departmental officers to state their name the first time they speak for the benefit of the Hansard reporters. I would also like to welcome the other member of our committee, Ms Annastacia Palaszczuk, the member for Inala and the Leader of the Opposition

Ms PALASZCZUK: Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Annastacia. I will now hand over to Ms Whithead.

Ms Whitehead: As we talked about over morning tea, Julie was not able to be here today because she has other engagements. I want to start by saying that it is a pleasure to be here this morning to provide the committee with an overview of the services, initiatives and strategies delivered by the department, which covers a very broad span of responsibility from education right through to employment. We have brought with us some copies of the strategic plan, which we will hand out to you, which is a consultation draft. It is out with our key stakeholders at the moment being consulted on. It is from 2012 to 2016 and it outlines the department's vision, purpose, objectives and key strategies. So we thought that would be quite a useful document for the committee to have in terms of it all being on the one page in a fairly summarised way.

Our vision—education, training, employment, brighter futures—encapsulates the scope within the department's business. Our services affect all Queenslanders—from early childhood right through to adulthood. I will take a moment to outline the scope of the service delivery functions of the department. We have four main service delivery functions, which are articulated in the strategic plan there. They are early childhood education and care, school education, training and tertiary education, and employment services. So they are the four main service delivery functions that we have. These are supported by corporate services such as HR, infrastructure, IT and finance.

Early childhood education and care provides services to families with children zero to 12 years of age. It establishes and funds kindergarten and integrated early years services as well as a number of parent and family support programs. It also regulates, approves and assesses the quality of early childhood services that are required to be and are regulated under the various pieces of legislation. As of August last year, there were a total of 2,659 licensed early childhood education and care services across Queensland as well as the 29 state schools that offer a preparatory program. These include kindergarten services, long day care, limited hours care service, family day care and school-age care services. They are all encapsulated in that number. The total enrolments in kindergarten are 41,322 based on the August census last year, which is approximately 68 per cent of the eligible population of children aged 3½ to 4½. It has been a key priority of the department to improve Queensland's access to kindergarten to ensure Queensland children are on par with those in other states as they start school.

School education delivers prep to year 12 education to approximately 733,650 students in 1,718 state and non-state schools across Queensland. Of this total, Education Queensland supports almost 500,000 students in approximately 1,240 Queensland state schools to prepare young people for successful transition into further education, training and/or work.

Training and tertiary education supports the skilling needs of Queensland through the funding, delivery and quality assurance of vocational education and training and providing support to higher education providers. There are 1,162 vocational education and training providers in Queensland as of April this year, including 11 TAFE institutes and two statutory TAFE institutes. Over 283,000 students were enrolled in publicly funded VET at the end of June 2011.

With the machinery of government changes, as you would know, employment is now part of this portfolio and this brings some great synergies and a number of opportunities for the department having employment as part of our responsibility. The department will be leading coordinated responses and policy responses to government intervention in the Queensland labour market to ensure effective integration between employment, engagement, job creation and building better connections between labour supply and industry needs. The department is working to build the capacity of the Queensland labour market by working with industry to develop strategies that meet the skills and labour needs and help meet community and government goals. Through the Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative, the department assists more than 20,000 job seekers each year by providing flexible integrated employment and training services tailored to suit individual circumstances and to match local labour market needs.

The department is committed to maximising employment opportunities for all Queenslanders and will contribute directly to the government's target of achieving an unemployment rate of four per cent within six years. Both employment and skills will play a pivotal role through supporting industry strategies in tourism, property and construction, resources, energy and agriculture. A skills and training task force will work with us to help reform the system to better meet the needs of industry and delivering improved completion rates and employment outcomes for Queenslanders. As a critical part of this, we will deliver the government's commitment of 10,000 additional apprentices over six years to help combat skills shortages. Queensland leads the nation in school based apprenticeships and this will continue to play a key role in achieving this goal, showing the powerful economic influence of this portfolio.

In education, the government has committed to getting the basics right with a strong focus on improving literacy and numeracy. Queensland has a world-class education system and what we are doing is building from that base. We continue to have high expectations for the outcomes of young Queenslanders. This must start in the early years to ensure that all kids get the best start for school. We are committed to helping those kids who need the most support. This includes people from low socioeconomic communities, Indigenous people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people with disabilities. The department contributes to both local and national agendas in these areas, including closing the gap on Indigenous advantage and various other national agreements and national partnerships. Local initiatives for disadvantaged clients include Step Up into Education. This initiative focuses on supporting children from areas of disadvantage to better be prepared for school.

There will be additional support for prep classes through the allocation of full-time teacher aides over the next four years in areas of greatest need. We are also improving e-learning for special needs students and delivering more speech and language pathologists in schools for children with learning disabilities.

To support this diversity in our school system we will invite up to 120 state schools to become independent public schools over the next four years. In addition, the Queensland Schools Plan Commission and the Building Our Future Schools Fund will assist in improved infrastructure planning for all Queensland schools. This ambitious agenda must be achieved in the context of a fiscally responsible approach to government expenditure. We are seeking to identify ways to reduce the burden of government red tape to minimise costs and impacts of government activity on Queenslanders. Jeff and I are both happy to answer any questions you may have on these new directions.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. As members would appreciate, the department is giving us an overview of the departmental activities and also where they are going for the year. Do we have any particular questions at this stage that you would like to ask Ms Whitehead? No. It is certainly very comprehensive what you have told us and it certainly seems as though it will be a busy year ahead for the department. I wish you well in that. As you would be aware, another bill has been brought into parliament that we will be considering at future meetings as well.

Ms Whitehead: A national regulator bill?

CHAIR: Yes. Are there any other questions?

Mr BOOTHMAN: What is the criteria for the allocation of the teacher aides? What do you use as the criteria to allocate these to individual schools?

Mr Hunt: The criteria was to look at the areas of greatest need first. In so doing, we looked at the school's socioeconomic classification and looked at their participation in other initiatives that were already in place, such as the national partnership for low SES schools and looked at those schools that may not have been in that bracket but were in the next bracket up and then were able to access the additional teacher aide time to maximise the teacher aide allocation for prep classes. We looked at the range of resources that were available to schools to support the provision of teacher aides to prep students, recognising that obviously the early years is a significant investment in terms of the development of young children. As is the government policy, we wanted to maximise the availability of teacher aide time in particularly the entry year—the prep year. So we looked at the schools on a socioeconomic basis and on the quantum of hours that were available and then made an allocation to those schools to top up the hours to maximise the potential to have two adults available and present in prep classes from the start of the next school year. That is a four-year program where there will be classes allocated—150 classes each year over four years to 600 classes—so that those full-time teacher aides are available in the schools that need them the most, given that the relationship of the number of adults in the classroom to support, particularly that entry part of the prep program, is well supported.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Is there a policy of listing where the most disadvantaged kids are?

Mr Hunt: I believe the list was published as part of the Premier's release. If it is not, then we can certainly make that available. The situation is we know that, as with other school staffing allocations, they are based on the day 8 enrolment collections each year. We need the teacher aides to go where they are appropriately placed. We have done the modelling on the basis of the 2012 enrolments. We would expect all of the schools that we have identified to qualify for the extra teacher aide time from the start of next year. In fact, there are slightly more, if I recall correctly, but we can come back to you if I do not have that right. In terms of the number of classes that will benefit next year, it is slightly more than the 150 to make sure that those teacher aide hours are going to the schools that are most going to benefit.

Ms PALASZCZUK: How is the kindergarten rollout progressing?

Ms Whitehead: As you know, the original commitment was pulled back from 340 kindergartens. So we are currently looking at how many additional kindergartens we need. We have not quite got a definite number. We are just looking at how many young families are using long day care to see where we need additional kindergartens. So we do not have a firm number of how many we are going to roll out in the future. The participation in kindergartens is obviously increasing, with 68 per cent last year. Our target is 86 per cent this year. It is a tough target this year, so we need to make sure that we are improving the take-up rate in long day care as well as making sure that the current kindergartens that we have are fully utilised.

Ms PALASZCZUK: When do you think you will be in a position to say—

Ms Whitehead: To say where the next ones will be?

Ms PALASZCZUK: Yes.

Ms Whitehead: I am not sure, but I think that it would be in the reasonably near future that we would have some indication. We are currently just looking closely at enrolment patterns and areas of need so that we can make a call about that, yes.

Mr Hunt: The significant gains that we have had in the participation rate is, again, part of that early-years agenda that the department has been rolling out. We have gone from around, I think, 29 per cent when we started to 68 per cent participation in kindy in 2011. As Annette says, 86 per cent this year is a further challenge for us and we are seeking to make sure that we get the programs in the places where there is demand for them.

Ms PALASZCZUK: How many people are employed on temporary contracts in the department of education?

Ms Whitehead: I am not able to answer that question.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Could you please provide that to me?

Mr Hunt: I think on a daily basis, with a workforce that is some 80,000 employees strong and 66,000 or so FTEs, that will fluctuate on a daily basis.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Around 20,000 are on temporaries?

Mr Hunt: I would not think it was that high, but we can check that for you. In terms of the teaching workforce, if that is a particular area of focus, clearly we need a whole range of temporary and casual staff in the teaching workforce. Given the nature of the workforce that is teaching, we need somebody in front of a class every day. So the way in which that work is comprised is different to, perhaps, some public service positions where the positions go unfilled on some days when staff are on sick leave or rec leave and the like. It is a large and complex organisation, as you would appreciate. In the teaching workforce, on any

day—and this is going back a little bit—we have literally thousands of casual teachers who are working on a daily basis in supply teaching to support those teachers who are sick or have emergent leave that takes them out of the classroom, long service leave and the like. Temporary teachers form an important part of our workforce in terms of making sure that schools are adequately staffed on a daily basis, again behind things like maternity leave, long service leave and marriage leave—those sorts of things that see teachers out of the class for shorter periods of time. So we will continue to manage our workforce appropriately given the demands on our service delivery.

Ms PALASZCZUK: One final question, because I have to go to another hearing: has there been any directive from the minister or the director-general in relation to the number of people on temporary contracts in the department of education?

Mr Hunt: We are working with central agencies to look at our budget expenditure now and in the out years. We will continue to do that. There is no figure, if that is what you are asking about. We are not working to a figure that I am aware of. But we are looking at the expenditure that is in our current workforce, with a view to making sure that the appropriate resources are available to maximise front-line service delivery, as is the government's—

Ms PALASZCZUK: So there has been no directive that people on temporary contracts need to be terminated or ceased by the end of June?

Mr Hunt: I am not aware of any directive, no.

CHAIR: The rollout of year 7; I guess that is one of the big challenges at the moment. Would you like to give us an overview of how that is proceeding?

Mr Hunt: Yes. The rollout of year 7 into secondary is a significant plank in our education reform agenda. Queensland, as you may be aware, is the early adopter of the national curriculum, which places Queensland at the forefront of that rollout, with English, maths and science transitioning this year to the national curriculum in Queensland schools. That is an exciting development. I guess the flow-on effect of the national curriculum rollout is the decision to move year 7 into secondary from 2015. The committee might be aware that there are a number of pilot schools that have been identified—20 in total, I think—that will progressively roll out. We have one this year and I think we have 19 or 18 next year and one the following year or thereabouts. I might have mixed up my years there. We have 20 rolling out in terms of preparing for that significant move of year 7 into secondary.

There is a program board oversighting the work of the rollout for the year 7 to secondary move. As the committee would be aware, there are some significant staffing and facilities requirements that need to be well planned for. That is why the department has to implement those things in a comprehensive and well planned way. We are working closely with stakeholders in terms of the rollout of the year 7 to secondary move. In the state schooling system, particularly, there is a subprogram board that is working to make sure that the state schooling rollout of year 7 into secondary is well planned and prepared for. That involves ICT, staffing, facilities and in terms of the curriculum coverage, the teacher preparation, the in-service and the school planning in terms of creating precincts for junior secondary students so that when we take the year 6 and year 7 students from 2014 into years 7 and 8 in secondary in 2015, those students are welcomed and well cared for in terms of their social and emotional wellbeing, their curriculum coverage, their access to services, specialist facilities and the like. That is to make sure that year 7 to secondary is a successful and comprehensive program supported by the Australian curriculum in terms of the curriculum coverage that provides, particularly in areas such as science, students with specialist teachers and opportunities in high school that are maximised on what is available in primary schools in terms of that curriculum coverage. The program is well placed.

There is a facilities program to examine the needs of every individual school in terms of the facilities make-up for secondary schools upon receipt of year 7 students into secondary from 2015. Obviously, that is a massive undertaking in terms of the program of work. Facilities officers across the state are working with schools to make sure that the appropriate facilities adjustments are made to accommodate those students and to make a success of the program.

Mr MULHERIN: What strategies has the department put in place to drive productivity, particularly in upskilling the workforce in workforce planning? Are there any strategies around that?

Mr Hunt: With regards to year 7 to secondary?

Mr MULHERIN: No, in the employment area post-secondary, vocational education and training, and tertiary training.

Mr Hunt: I will make a couple of comments. I think Queensland leads the nation in terms of the number of school based apprenticeships and traineeships that exist in Queensland schools. That has been a success. Queensland has been held up as an example in terms of both the integration of VET into senior secondary schooling and the school based apprenticeship and traineeship program.

Mr MULHERIN: I realise all that. One of the issues that we have as a nation, particularly with the energy sector driving the economy, is having people with the appropriate skills to obtain employment in that area. There are jobs on offer, but it is the whole skilling issue. It is not about the transition from primary to secondary, secondary to vocational/tertiary. It is what happens after that. What strategies has the department got in place to deal with workforce development across the different sectors? For example, the Brisbane

mining sector will no doubt take people with the appropriate skills and appropriate training where they have been upskilled from other sectors of the economy, which will then put pressure on those sectors to perform at a productive level.

Mr Hunt: I guess, in part—and, Annette, you might want to speak—but the Skills Commission is a key part in terms of working with industry to identify the skills needs and target training opportunities with industry. There are a number of industry and community partnerships that the department, through either the Skills Commission or directly, have in terms of targeted programs to support key industry groups. Obviously the mining industry is a key part of that consideration.

Mr MULHERIN: But are they actually working, say, with the rural sector to say these are the skills that will be required in the rural sector between now and 2020 and what steps are you taking to assist those industries in that sector to do workforce development plans, identifying the skills and ensuring that there are opportunities for people to be upskilled, particularly in adult employment? The mining industry, for example: with the construction side, they can give you what their requirements will be for 2020, both in a construction and operational sense. What other work is being done in other sectors of the economy around that so that there is a lot more planning, so that you can effectively allocate the resources that are available for skilling? Has there been much work done in that?

Ms Whitehead: We probably could get back to you with exactly what is being done. But my understanding is that Skills Queensland and the department are working with regional industry groups to develop regional plans, so that is a priority for them, to put regional plans in place.

Mr MULHERIN: When you talk about ‘regional plans’, what are you talking about? Is it a statistical division? What do you classify as a region? Is it an economic catchment area or is it a defined regional area or is it a statistical division; what is it?

Ms Whitehead: I think we need to get back to you with that advice about that level of detail. Certainly it is geographical areas where they are looking particularly at where there are particular skill shortages and what they will do.

Mr MULHERIN: What do you mean by ‘geographical’?

Ms Whitehead: Areas where there are particular industry needs.

Mr BENNETT: If I may, Mr Mulherin. I was involved with Skills Queensland. They have geographical boundaries that they set up and they have a needs based assessment on industry driving a sector.

Mr MULHERIN: I realise that, but my concern is that you can draw a geographical area, but if you take the mining industry you have the Galilee Basin and the Bowen Basin. Those basins are economic drivers and they interact with a number of geographical areas. They will have impacts on communities that are regionally based. That catchment would impact on Gladstone, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville, where you draw your skills. They would have an impact, then, on the agricultural sector, the retail sector. What sort of planning has been done to address the needs of those sectors in coming years, to have the appropriate skills in their workforce to drive the productivity, which will drive the economy, which will ensure that we all maintain our living standards?

CHAIR: Mr Mulherin, we are probably going to a rather technical area that is more under Skills Queensland, perhaps, than under these people. Perhaps this could be an area that we could have a deeper briefing on.

Ms Whitehead: That could be done. We are also happy to go back and give the committee some information about their planning process and give you feedback. That is not a problem.

CHAIR: Perhaps this requires a broader aspect than you were prepared for this morning.

Mr MULHERIN: I am sorry; I did not want to embarrass people. I thought we could have a general discussion on education, training and skilling.

CHAIR: That is fine.

Mr Hunt: To take Mr Bennett’s advice around Skills Queensland, Skills Queensland looks at the upstream and downstream associated industries and businesses as well, of those cornerstone projects.

Mr MULHERIN: How does Skills Queensland relate to you as the deputy director-general or the director-general? What is the line of communication or line management? I know that Skills Queensland is a statutory model.

Ms Whitehead: And reports to the minister.

Mr Hunt: And the director-general sits on the Skills Queensland board.

Mr MULHERIN: So the link there is the director-general.

Ms Whitehead: The director-general would sit on their board, yes, correct.

Mr MULHERIN: But at the end of the day, doesn’t the department allocate the funds to Skills Queensland for training?

Ms Whitehead: It allocates some money to Skills Queensland, that is correct, yes, but it is an independent statutory body.

CHAIR: Mr Mulherin, you have flagged a very good area here, that as a committee we may look into in further depth.

Mr BENNETT: In the explanatory notes, point 2, going on further about Skills Queensland, I have a question that I was waiting to ask. When we abolished the Training and Employment Recognition Council and we moved those skills and part of that role to Skills Queensland, are you able to brief the committee on your expectations about the staffing within those organisations and, again, the linkages of Skills Queensland—

CHAIR: I think probably we have not actually had an in-depth briefing on this bill at the moment.

Mr MULHERIN: We are not discussing the bill, are we?

CHAIR: No, not just yet. I suggest we might leave this until we do have a departmental briefing on this bill, which we will ask for at a later date.

Mr Hunt: And the technical people from the department would be happy, or from Skills Queensland, to provide that detail.

Mr PUCCI: Going back to teacher aides and the criteria for selecting schools. What of the multicultural community? I know you talked about the socioeconomic backgrounds, but is the multicultural community of each area or each school considered in this? Some communities have a large population of non-English speaking people who would probably benefit from those kinds of teacher aides. Is that considered?

Mr Hunt: Yes. In terms of the socioeconomic assessment of each community, part of that calculation is the mix of students in the individual schools. The short answer would be, yes, it is a consideration in the allocation. I guess the other part I would say, as I answered the earlier question, is that there are a range of programs in schools already to support some of the disadvantage that exist in some school communities and those programs are ongoing during this period. During the four-year rollout of the additional prep teacher aide time, those considerations will continue to be part of the rollout program. So the short answer is yes. As part of the socioeconomic status, there are also other funds available to schools in terms of support aides and other resources to support students from a non-English-speaking background or a language background other than English.

Mr PUCCI: I am not so much talking about the social economic background; I am talking about the multicultural background. That is what I am mostly concerned about.

Mr Hunt: Yes. Again, the short answer is yes. Part of the calculation of the allocation of the resources is there to take account of those different needs right across the school community. Does that answer your question?

Mr PUCCI: Is there a way that we can see what you are using to base these needs on? Do you have some kind of formula somewhere—a weighting as such—that you put these categories into in terms of how you make these decisions?

Mr Hunt: My understanding of the formula that was used to allocate the teacher aides was based on what is known as a socioeducational advantage index which looks at a range of factors, but we can get that detail for you if you would like that.

Mr PUCCI: I would like to see that.

CHAIR: You may be aware that the Auditor-General's report on improving student attendance has been referred to our committee for our consideration, and I certainly do not intend to ask for a briefing from you or anything on it at this stage. I have just a general question: how do our school attendances compare with other states?

Mr Hunt: That is a very good question. One of the difficulties and one of the projects that has been ongoing nationally is to try to improve the comparability of student attendance data across the country. I am sure the committee would understand that the federation has a range of legislation and departmental policies across different states and territories that inform and influence the collection, the recording and the reporting of student attendance. The national student attendance measure, which attempts to bring that data together from across different jurisdictions, is not directly comparable, as I think the Auditor-General's report notes, given that there are slightly different classification categories—that is, what is counted as a part-day or full-day absence. Some jurisdictions do it hour by hour or period by period as opposed to half- and full-day absences as Queensland does.

In terms of the comparability, there seems to be a broad pattern of similarity across the states and territories, notwithstanding that some of the reporting approaches taken by different jurisdictions makes that comparison difficult. But over time it is fair to say that most jurisdictions are fairly stable in terms of the attendance rates that they have achieved across their systems. We recognise that junior secondary, as an example, has lower attendance than perhaps middle primary. Senior secondary attendance rates tend to trend up again as compared to junior secondary. Prep has a slightly lower attendance rate than year 1 and year 2 perhaps as a result of the illness and entry sort of issues that some younger children might experience in prep.

I think the overarching pattern is that students are attending school overwhelmingly as we would expect them to be. However, we have always said that we can do better. We know that every day counts, as the department's strategy is labelled. We know that from an early period every day counts, and we can see that in the relationship between attendance patterns and literacy and numeracy outcomes. That is why the Every Day Counts strategy is there—to try to make sure that parents and students are aware of the importance of attending school every day, not only for academic outcomes but for social inclusion, for participation in the broader extracurricular program of the school and for the range of benefits that are available through schooling.

The report from the Auditor-General identified some suggestions about classifying student attendance into certain brackets and the department's view has been that that is something that we need to treat fairly carefully because we do not want to be in the business of excusing nonattendance up to a certain threshold. Our philosophy has been that every day counts and we would like to maximise student attendance so that every child could attend every day, which we know is not a reality. Those of us who are parents know that children get sick, we know that there are family events and we know that we can avail ourselves of opportunities or things that we might need to do for family or cultural reasons on certain days that does disrupt the pattern of schooling for some students. But our overarching message is to make sure that students attend every day of the school year that is possible for them to attend. We have also got to take into consideration the impact of sick students attending school that might then impact on other students' attendance as well. So we need to be careful what we are talking about when we are understanding the attendance patterns of students. But, as I say, the department's philosophy and strategy has been to have an awareness campaign for parents in particular and for students in terms of the importance that attending school every day the school is open is very important to their learning and life outcomes.

CHAIR: I guess what you were saying there is that as a comparison with other states the measurement criteria differs so that it is difficult to actually compare.

Mr Hunt: Correct, and the Productivity Commission and ACARA, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, which collects that information on behalf of the nation, make that commentary when they publish the data—that is, that they are not directly comparable. For example, non-government schools report currently on the last 20 days of attendance during the month of May whereas government jurisdictions report on the 100 days or thereabouts in the first semester for each jurisdiction. So already there is a lack of comparability between the periods. I understand the federal minister has made commentary recently about talking with non-government sectors about normalising or making consistent the collection periods—which we would welcome but recognising that that may place a burden on particularly smaller independent schools where they do not have the sophisticated IT systems that larger sectors may have. So I guess there is a balance in the reporting here. Broadly speaking, we think the data is robust enough and the fairest comparisons are within jurisdiction year on year rather than across jurisdictions where we know there to be differences in legislation, differences in government policy about recording and different IT systems that are used to record student absences. So there are a range of conflicting issues that we need to be mindful of and to be able to, when making those comparisons, be aware that they are not directly comparable.

Mr PUCCI: I know that you do not like the term or I have read that the department does not like the term 'unsatisfactory attendance'. How do we keep track consistently across the state of unsatisfactory attendance if we do not have a definition of what unsatisfactory attendance is?

Mr Hunt: If I am understanding you correctly, the Auditor-General was talking about setting a threshold of unsatisfactory attendance. In the state sector if I can talk about that, the state sector has a significantly enhanced IT system that allows principals and teachers to enter and monitor student attendance and have reports about the levels of attendance, and the danger here, as we discussed with the Auditor-General, is to assume that every child's story is the same. I think the Auditor-General's report cited a couple of examples that were certainly encountered on their audit path where there were students with significant mental health issues for example or students that had difficulties at home. There were many fine examples where schools were using government and non-government agencies and support workers to make sure that those kids were as connected with their school as they possibly could be.

In terms of our own practice, what the Auditor-General was seeking for us to do was to put a threshold at 90 per cent and say that anything below that was unsatisfactory. That was part of my response to the chair in that by setting that threshold you may well be excusing nonattendance down to a 10 per cent threshold. We would prefer to say and keep the policy position focused on the fact that every day counts. If you are a 95 per cent attending student, we would like to see you try to maximise your attendance to even 96 per cent, 97 per cent or 98 per cent. If you are an 85 per cent attending student, then we would like to see you maximise your attendance, and schools are working with individual students on a daily basis to make sure that every child's story is known to the principal, the deputy and the attendance officer if they have one to make sure that those students' stories are well known and well managed and that the school is working with the parent and communicating well with the parent about that child's engagement with the school.

Mr PUCCI: Good. I can understand not having that definition of 'unsatisfactory attendance' go out to the public and to the students and teachers, but I think there has to be some kind of standard that flags something that this is a problem. If there is not a consistent term or if there is not consistency of what is deemed a problem in attendance, how do you know it is a problem?

Mr Hunt: My response to that would be that the 'problem' is different for every student. For the child who is having dialysis, for example, once a week or however frequently that may occur or some other medical treatment, that would be a very different story in terms of managing whether it is unsatisfactory or not. In fact, that absence might be deemed satisfactory.

Mr PUCCI: That is right, but it was flagged and then you could see that that is why.

Mr Hunt: We do have a system. We have an IT system called OneSchool that is in every state school that provides principals, teachers, their attendance officers if they have one and the admin officers who normally do the recording of absences and attendance with reports about the students that are nonattending in a given period, whether they do it on a weekly basis or a fortnightly basis. Part of our corporate reporting to schools also provides schools with feedback about their overall attendance rate by year level and we provide norms in terms of whether that school's year 1 attendance rate is above average, below average and those sorts of things so schools can get a bit of a fix on whether they need to pay more attention to attendance or whether they are doing well comparatively to other schools.

Mr MULHERIN: So it is really understanding the data collected and then developing actions that will link the student and student's family to appropriate support? For example, you can understand someone receiving dialysis, but where there is a lack of empathy or understanding about education because of generational issues it is about how you use that data to link that person and the family to relevant agencies to try to turn things around. Is that the sort of approach that you are taking?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely, Mr Mulherin. I visited a school with the Auditor-General's team and the deputy principal there knew exactly the students who were having, what you might term, attendance problems because they had come up on their radar in terms of their monitoring. The deputy principal was able to describe the story of every one of those students, and there was a different story for each of those students. The school was working actively with government and non-government agencies to make sure that, whether there was a women's shelter involved or a guidance officer or a school based police officer or a school nurse, that student's attendance was able to be maximised.

CHAIR: I think this report is going to generate a lot of discussion and the purpose of this meeting today was not to go in depth into this report, but I certainly thank you for your answers along that line.

Mr Hunt: Madam Chair, if you could just indulge me one more point on that.

CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Hunt: That is that we are responding to the Auditor-General's report and, to take Mr Pucci's question about classification or flagging, there is a new report being made available to schools to make it even more simple for them to gain access to the students and to flag the students that they might want to otherwise more actively consider.

Mr PUCCI: As long as it is consistent throughout the schools.

Mr Hunt: It will be right across. Our OneSchool system is a consistent IT system that is right across the 1,240 state schools in Queensland which is giving them the same sort of power, I guess, in terms of that analysis and reporting and understanding their own students' stories.

CHAIR: That is great, and we do appreciate your input because, as I say, it is going to generate quite a lot of discussion.

Mr Hunt: It will.

CHAIR: We certainly appreciate the response that you have given us. Are there any other broader questions that anyone would like to put to our departmental people while we have them here?

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question is about maintenance funding for each and every school. Is there a flat maintenance budget that you actually give to the schools or is it based on the school's age? For instance, in terms of a school that is five years old compared to a school which is 16 years old, do they receive the same maintenance budget?

Mr Hunt: I might take that on notice.

Ms Whitehead: We would have to take that on notice.

Mr Hunt: It is not a flat rate. It is obviously scaled to the asset management program and the size of the school and the needs of the school. Site visits are undertaken. Schools have a certain degree of autonomy with a bucket of funding and then there are other parts of the asset management program that are more targeted in terms of larger investments.

Mr LATTER: I would like to raise with you some concerns that have been raised with me particularly centring around the healthy eating policy in state schools. Certainly, while I admire that initiative, there seem to be some issues around that that are more subsequent issues than anything else I suppose. Is the department aware that where these schools are encumbered with healthy eating choices the students are prone to spend their money outside the school on unhealthy items—soft drink, for example, is a big one—which leads to a number of issues?

First and foremost, they tend to be buying more soft drink, for example, outside the school and bringing it in than they would ordinarily be able to buy inside the school if it were available at the school. Subsequently, that leads to these students, having spent their money outside of the school, effectively short-changing the school from profits that it may have been able to make and that would subsequently end up back in the school. In terms of that particular policy, is it a rigid policy or is there the flexibility for certain schools where this is a particular problem to be able to implement other programs, such as introducing foods that may not necessarily be as healthy but that can be monitored in terms of how much is being provided to the students?

Mr Hunt: Thanks for the question. It is fair to say that we might want to take that on notice as well. But I might make some general comments. The department would take the view that it is important that we model appropriate healthy eating practices. Tuckshop menus are an important part of that, as well as the curriculum coverage of healthy eating practices that teachers work with students on during the course of the normal curriculum delivery. I think potentially with any set of rules kids are clever and they may seek to work around those rules to their benefit, but I think schools play a significant role in promoting that healthy eating practice, and the department is certainly committed to that.

My understanding of the policy and the practice is that schools work with their local P&Cs who typically run the tuckshops and set the menus. They do encompass what they call 'red food' days, where pies and sausage rolls and other 'red food'—the food that you should not have every day—are available to students as part of the normal planning of the tuckshop. We would rather them be working with 'green foods' and kids' understanding of 'green foods'—that healthy foods are better for their longer term health and wellbeing, and life outcomes. Without checking, I think the policy has enough latitude for school communities to negotiate those things locally. We will check that and bring that back to the committee. But we understand the perspective, and we would be hoping that parents' understanding, students' understanding and the promotion of healthy eating practices will change the practices and, if not change the practices, help students understand that red foods are only to be had every now and again, not every day, obviously because of the potential health impacts.

Mr LATTER: I just clarify there that my concern is primarily centred around high schools or senior schooling, not so much primary schools. Particularly in those age groups with the younger students, I think healthy choices can be monitored a lot better. However, of particular concern to me is not just soft drinks in high schools and the fact that these students are simply buying them elsewhere and bringing them in anyway. I have a grave concern—and certainly it has been raised with me by my community—with energy drinks such as Mother, V or whatever it may be, where the students are effectively buying these in particularly large quantities before school and they are drinking them before school and during school. I am concerned about the impacts of those drinks on the students while they are at school. So, yes, I would ask that the department take it on notice and come back to the committee with a report on issues like that. I would ask that the department consider some degree of flexibility, particularly with high schools that may flag this as an issue, and come back to me and let me know what your findings are.

Mr Hunt: Sure.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. I think our time has definitely come to an end.

Ms Whitehead: Chair, earlier when Annastacia Palaszczuk talked about early childhood I think I might have said that the original intent was for 340 kindies to be built. I just wanted to clarify, in terms of the record being accurate, that it was 240 kindies that we were originally going to build.

CHAIR: I think that does draw us to a conclusion. I thank you both, Ms Whitehead and Mr Hunt, for your attendance and certainly for your excellent briefing and your overview.

Ms Whitehead: We will get back to you on those other issues.

CHAIR: Thank you. If you require further background on those questions, that will be available to you. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned at 11.35 am