



Western Australian Auditor General's Report

# Every Day Counts: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools

Report 9 – August 2009





**THE PRESIDENT  
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**THE SPEAKER  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**PERFORMANCE EXAMINATION – EVERY DAY COUNTS: MANAGING STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN  
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

This report has been prepared for submission to Parliament under the provisions of section 25 of the *Auditor General Act 2006*.

Performance examinations are an integral part of the overall performance auditing program and seek to provide Parliament with assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of public sector programs and activities thereby identifying opportunities for improved performance.

The information provided through this approach will, I am sure, assist Parliament in better evaluating agency performance and enhance parliamentary decision-making to the benefit of all Western Australians.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Murphy'.

COLIN MURPHY  
AUDITOR GENERAL  
19 August 2009

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## Auditor General's Overview

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A good education gives a child key life skills, opens up career and economic opportunities and helps them participate in their community. Education can also be a powerful tool in overcoming social exclusion and disadvantage.

A large and growing number of children are at risk of missing out on those skills and opportunities because they do not go to school regularly. For the vast majority of children, attending school is the way to get an education. For some, the impact of not doing so can last a lifetime.

Parents have the ultimate and also legal responsibility for ensuring that their children go to school. Schools also have a major role to play as they are often a natural focal point in delivering all kinds of help and support to children and their families. But addressing rising levels of non-attendance cannot be left to parents or schools alone.

The Department of Education and Training needs to become more engaged in the development of good attendance policy and strategies and in monitoring results. The Department has a range of significant challenges it must face. However, it is clear to me that making sure that children are in school regularly has not been given the same level of priority as other factors that can put a child's education at risk.

The Department also needs to ensure that schools have better access to related services that other government agencies provide. A child not going to school can be a symptom of complex family and community problems. In these cases, the child, their family and the school often need assistance from community support agencies.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the assistance the Department gave to my staff during this audit, and their willingness to embrace opportunities to improve school attendance rates. This is important, because for a child, every day at school really does count.

# Executive Summary

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## Introduction

Regular attendance at school is important for a student to learn. A child's academic achievement is at risk if they regularly miss more than half a day of school a week.

Poor educational outcomes can affect student's work skills and their ability to participate in the workforce. It can also affect their level of participation in the community.

In Western Australia, a child must attend school from the beginning of the year in which they turn six years and six months until the end of the year in which they turn 17.

Under the *School Education Act 1999* (the Act) parents have primary responsibility for ensuring their child goes to school and may be prosecuted for failing to enrol a child in an approved educational program or for non-attendance without a valid reason.

The Act requires a school principal to enrol any student who presents at the school and to maintain attendance records for them. Under the policies of the Department of Education and Training (DET) school principals must follow up any cases of non-attendance and establish whether the absence is reasonable.

Within the education system, schools have primary responsibility for dealing with non-attendance, supported in difficult cases by DET's district offices and Central Office. During 2008, schools recorded and managed an estimated 5.6 million absences for students in Years 1 to 10.

DET launched an attendance strategy in 2006. It introduced an improved attendance audit, a school resource package, a one-off grant to district offices and publicity material promoting attendance. As well, DET has an attendance policy, student tracking system and legal options under the Act.

In examining student attendance we looked at the level of attendance in Western Australian public schools, especially for those students whose attendance puts them at educational risk. We compared these rates to publicly available attendance data from other states and private schools. The examination focused on DET's policies and strategies and how these are actioned by district offices in helping schools manage non-attendance. We also looked at DET's systems to measure, monitor and trigger action on non-attendance. We did not examine the performance of individual schools and teachers, or the outcomes from specific interventions or programs.

## Conclusion

Of the more than 177 000 students in Years 1 to 10 in WA's public schools in 2008, almost 49 000 (28 per cent) are at educational risk because they are not attending school regularly. DET does not have a timely and comprehensive understanding of attendance in schools and has not been successful in addressing the growing number of students that do not attend school regularly.

## Key Findings

- *School attendance is steadily declining. Between 2000 and 2008 average attendance in primary schools fell from 94.5 per cent to 92.6 per cent and from 90.7 per cent to 88.0 per cent in secondary schools.*
- *Almost three quarters of public students attend school regularly (over 90 per cent of the time).*
- *The number of students at educational risk due to poor attendance rose six per cent in 2008 to nearly 49 000.*
- *Poor school attendance is a significant problem among Indigenous and non-Indigenous students:*
  - *The greatest numbers of students at educational risk due to poor attendance are non-Indigenous children in metropolitan schools.*
  - *A high proportion of Indigenous students have low levels of attendance, making them over twice as likely to be at educational risk. Achieving adequate levels of education is one of the key contributors to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.*
- *Attendance drops significantly as students progress through secondary school so that by Year 10 only 53 per cent of students attend regularly.*
- *DET has a strategy and policy to manage attendance and its approach works for students who are occasionally absent but not for those who are persistently absent.*
- *Few schools have improved attendance over the past three years.*
- *DET's attendance policy and strategies are not based on a good understanding of the major causes for why students do not go to school. Unless strategies address the causes, school attendance will not improve.*

- *Schools and districts do not have clear guidance on how and when to respond to poor attendance so they may not provide the right response at the right time.*
- *DET rarely uses its last resort options of attendance panels and prosecutions.*
- *Successful strategies developed by schools or districts are not captured and replicated, so DET does not know which interventions are effective and could be used more widely.*
- *Attendance is not consistently used to monitor schools' performance nor to inform DET, so a potential indicator of poor academic achievement is not utilised.*

## Key Recommendations

The Department of Education and Training should:

- publicise, promote and demonstrate the importance of regular school attendance to parents, students and the community
- develop a better understanding of the causes of non-attendance and the student groups they affect most
- review its current attendance strategy to:
  - reflect the causes of non-attendance and which student groups they affect most
  - ensure greater consistency in when and how schools and districts respond to non-attendance
  - improve guidance on the types of interventions required and the levels of attendance that trigger these
  - provide evidence based interventions that reflect the different student cohorts and the requirements of schools and districts
  - link attendance to other measures of educational risk.
- improve the use of attendance as a key indicator of educational risk, including as an early signal of changes in student behaviour and academic performance
- improve the processes for dealing formally with parents and students for persistent failure to attend school, such as fast-tracking referral to attendance panels

- **ensure that a timely and comprehensive view of attendance data and issues is available to schools, districts and Central Office staff, including information for triggering and monitoring interventions**
- **ensure on a regular basis that schools are implementing the attendance strategy and policy and are responding appropriately and consistently to low attendance**
- **set and regularly monitor targets for student attendance, including an overall state target**
- **evaluate and review interventions addressing attendance, to identify and replicate good practice across districts and schools.**

## Response from the Department of Education and Training

The Department of Education and Training accepts and supports the key findings of the performance examination and is committed to addressing them. While the Department has in place a wide range of processes, it is evident that these can be substantially improved through the development of more extensive measures of intervention to support chronic non-attendance. The Department is pleased to work in a collaborative capacity with the Office of the Auditor General to implement relevant recommendations made within the report.

Due to the complex nature of student attendance the Department acknowledges there is no simple or 'one size fits all' approach. The causes of student absences are diverse and continually evolving. They require complex strategies that are often dependent on external variables. Solutions to improving student attendance are multifaceted and are underpinned by behavioural change in schools, families and communities. The student is also central to all solutions.

Recommendations made as an outcome to this examination are welcomed. They have identified the strengths and weaknesses of the management of student attendance in public schools and have provided key focus areas for improvement.

The recommendations will be used to inform the implementation of the new state-wide attendance strategy for Western Australia's public schools. As a result, it is anticipated that our public school students will reap the educational benefits of regular attendance: a critical prerequisite to school success.

## Going to school is key to learning, and every day counts

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### **Poor school attendance can place students at risk of under-achieving**

Children who regularly miss school are likely to experience significant disruption to their education. For instance, a student who misses more than one full day per week on average would lose two years of education over 10 years.

Two key Western Australian research studies by the Institute for Child Health Research have shown that a student's level of school attendance has a major influence on their academic achievement. These studies concluded that a child's education is at risk if they frequently miss more than half a day of school a week (less than 90 per cent attendance). Attendance above 90 per cent is considered regular attendance.

Educational risk is the risk that students are not achieving the major learning outcomes of schooling. Attendance is not an outcome in itself, but a means to an educational end as educational programs are mostly provided in classrooms on school grounds for students in Years 1 to 10.

If a student's attendance remains low, the pattern of absence can become a major influence on their educational outcomes. The student will miss out on essential lessons, creating gaps in their core skills such as literacy and numeracy. Achieving adequate levels of education is one of the key contributors to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Students who are regularly absent are also less likely to fully participate socially or in the workforce. Some of the issues faced by these students can include long-term unemployment, involvement in the justice system and placing themselves at physical risk when they are not at school.

Many factors can contribute to a student's risk of under-achieving, including the school environment, the student themselves, and family, social, or community issues. These may result in a student not attending school regularly.

There are other indicators of educational risk such as behaviour and academic achievement. These are outside the scope of this examination.

Low school attendance can be a cause or indicate that a child is at educational risk. Attendance records will not identify all students at educational risk as some may not learn even when they attend school regularly. Nevertheless, it stands out amongst the many possible causes (and indicators) of educational risk, as it is relatively easy for schools, district offices and DET Central to measure and monitor.

## Parents and students are ultimately responsible for attending school

Going to school is essential to a child's education and it is important that school attendance is a priority for the student and their parent(s). Parents play a key role in encouraging regular school attendance in partnership with the school.

This is reflected in the *School Education Act 1999* (the Act). The Act places primary responsibility on parents for ensuring their child goes to school. It requires parents to justify any absences from school with a valid reason.

The Act has sanctions, such as fines or prosecution, for non-attendance without a valid reason, or for failing to enrol a child in an approved educational program.

In 2008, parents justified 64 per cent of absences with valid reasons. Whether or not parents provide valid reasons, absences from school particularly where it is ongoing impact on a child's education.

## DET must provide suitable schooling and manage attendance

The Department of Education and Training (DET) is responsible under the Act for ensuring the enrolment and education of every school-aged child. In Western Australia, a child must attend school from the beginning of the year in which they turn six years and six months until the end of the year in which they turn 17.

Although school attendance is compulsory until a student turns 17, they can complete their Year 11 and 12 schooling at an employer's workplace or through other authorised training options off school grounds. In 2008 some 177 000 students were enrolled in Years 1 to 10 in WA public schools.

DET is responsible for creating a school environment which is conducive to student attendance and learning. This includes teaching style, course content and the classroom environment. DET may require help from other agencies to address factors which lie outside the school environment.

The Act requires a school principal to enrol any student from the local area who presents at the school and to keep daily attendance records. Under DET's policies, principals must follow up any cases of non-attendance. This includes establishing whether the absence is reasonable as described by the Act.

# DET primarily manages attendance through schools and district offices

DET has assigned responsibilities for managing attendance among its Central Office, 14 district education offices (district offices), and more than 760 public schools, each administered by a school principal.

Schools are primarily responsible for addressing attendance, supported by their district office and Central Office.

MANAGING ATTENDANCE IN DET
<p><b>Schools</b></p> <p>Record attendance daily and enter data into the school's Student Information database, including the reason given for any absence. Contact parents such as through SMS or telephone if no reason is given why their child is not at school.</p> <p>Monitor non-attendance. Further investigate if a student's attendance falls below 90 per cent over a term. Convene meetings with parents and students. Document interventions.</p> <p>Develop and implement a documented attendance plan with the parent, key stakeholders and the student (if appropriate).</p> <p>Case-manage student. Work with the district office and other agencies (as appropriate) to restore attendance.</p> <p>Refer students to the 'Children's Whereabouts Unknown' list when they cannot be located after 15 or so school days.</p> <p>Implement and document what they have done to improve a student's attendance.</p> <p>Refer unresolved cases to an attendance panel. Provide advice and assistance to students with a poor attendance record and their parents or carers.</p>
<p><b>District offices</b></p> <p>Help case-manage a student at the school's request.</p> <p>May visit the student's home, or convene meetings with parents and students.</p> <p>Establish processes and protocols to help schools access support from other agencies.</p> <p>Convene a School Attendance Panel on request from the school. This is a small group of people which provide advice and assistance to students and parents to help resolve non-attendance issues.</p>
<p><b>Central Office</b></p> <p>The Attendance Unit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develops attendance strategy, policy and programs</li> <li>• provides advice on attendance panels. Assists the district office in keeping data on attendance panels and outcomes, and people who can sit on the panels</li> <li>• maintains a register of children whose whereabouts are unknown</li> <li>• facilitates the annual school attendance audit, and reports on attendance rates annually</li> <li>• organises regular attendance forums for DET staff.</li> </ul> <p>The Director General may certify the unsatisfactory outcome of an attendance panel hearing and recommend prosecution under the Act.</p>

**Figure 1: Responsibilities for managing attendance and dealing with non-attendance**

Source: OAG

DET has not allocated specific funding for attendance, except for a one-off allocation in 2006. From 2009 DET funds schools to provide school-based services, including addressing attendance. It is at the school's discretion how they allocate these funds to achieve their education outcomes. Schools and districts may use their funds to employ school attendance officers or implement programs that impact on attendance.

In past years, DET allocated funding to each school based on the number of students as well as for specific programs. Some of these programs also impacted on attendance, such as the Behaviour Management and Discipline program, to improve students' behaviour at school.

DET's current attendance strategy has been in place since 2006. DET started to draft a new attendance strategy during this examination.

## Our examination focus and approach

We examined attendance for students in Years 1 to 10 in WA public schools, focusing particularly on those students who do not attend school regularly. The examination focused on three key questions:

- Does WA have a good level of school attendance?
  - Are attendance rates improving, and similar across schools and student cohorts?
  - Do students attend school at a level that minimises educational risk?
- Does DET know the trends and patterns of attendance?
  - Does DET know the trends and patterns in attendance in WA and the key areas for improvement?
  - Does DET have adequate systems for monitoring, evaluating and reporting student attendance, to adequately support decision-making?
  - Does DET identify and monitor students at educational risk due to low attendance?
- Does DET manage poor school attendance and the associated educational risk?
  - Does DET have adequate strategies and processes in place to support the management of attendance?
  - Does DET manage attendance as a key response to students at educational risk?

We did not examine:

- attendance at non-government schools
- the management of, and outcomes for, individual students
- performance of individual schools or teachers
- outcomes from specific interventions
- attendance prior to Year 1 (pre-primary and kindergarten) or in Years 11 and 12.

Our performance examination covers attendance during the first 10 years of compulsory education. School is compulsory in WA from the year in which a child turns six years and six months (Year 1) until the end of the year in which the child reaches the age of 17.

We excluded Years 11 and 12 as the student options are substantially different in these years. Also, the age of compulsory schooling has increased from 16 in 2006 and 2007 to 17 in 2008.

In conducting the examination we:

- examined agency files and key documents
- analysed DET data, mainly focusing on 2006 to 2008
- compared attendance rates with other sectors using data from the *National report on schooling in Australia 2007*
- interviewed key DET staff in Central Office and seven regions, including visits to five district offices and eight schools.

We conducted this examination in accordance with Australian Auditing Standards.

# Declining attendance is putting over 25 per cent of public students at educational risk

## Findings

- *School attendance is steadily declining. Between 2000 and 2008 average attendance in primary schools fell from 94.5 per cent to 92.6 per cent and from 90.7 per cent to 88.0 per cent in secondary schools.*
- *Almost three quarters of public students attend school regularly (over 90 per cent of the time).*
- *The number of students at educational risk due to poor attendance rose 6 per cent in 2008 to nearly 49 000.*
- *Poor school attendance is a significant problem among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.*
  - *The greatest numbers of students at educational risk due to poor attendance are non-Indigenous children in metropolitan schools.*
  - *A high proportion of Indigenous students have low levels of attendance, making them over twice as likely to be at educational risk. Achieving adequate levels of education is one of the key ingredients to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.*
- *On any given day in 2008, some 15 500 (8.7 per cent) students were absent from school.*
- *Attendance drops significantly as students progress through secondary school so that by Year 10 only 53 per cent of students attend regularly.*
- *Poor attendance wastes educational services as students who are away from school miss out on the lessons delivered. Persistent non-attendees also need additional services to catch up.*

## Recommendations

The Department of Education and Training should:

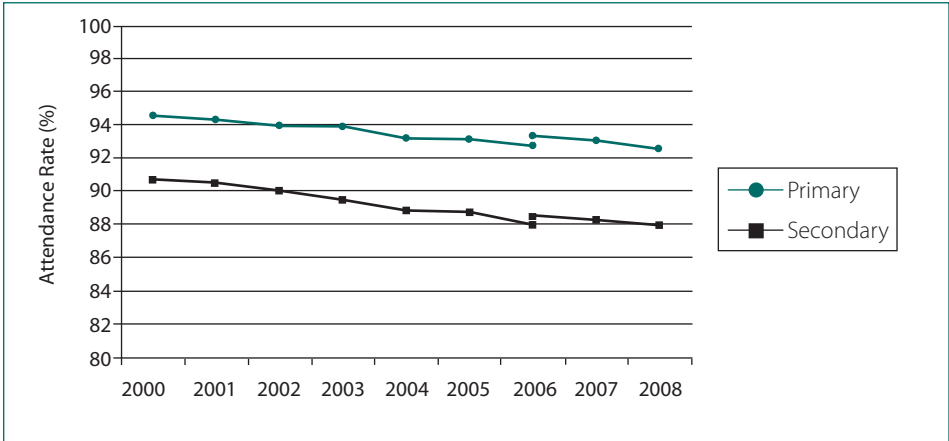
- publicise, promote and demonstrate the importance of regular school attendance to parents, students and the community
- develop their information systems so that analysis can be done on individual students giving a better understanding of the causes of non-attendance.

# Overall student attendance is 91 per cent and has been steadily declining

The average attendance rate in WA public schools was 91.3 per cent in 2008. On any given day, some 15 500 students (8.7 per cent) were away from school.

Some 128 227 WA public students (72.4 per cent) attended school regularly in 2008. Their attendance rate was 96 per cent, including absences for sickness and other legitimate reasons. But the average rate of attendance by both primary and secondary students is declining steadily.

Between 2000 and 2008 average attendance in primary schools fell from 94.5 per cent to 92.6 per cent and from 90.7 per cent to 88.0 per cent in secondary schools (figure 2).



**Figure 2: Primary and secondary school attendance rates in public schools since 2000**

*Both primary and secondary attendance rates are declining. In 2006 DET changed the way it collects student attendance data. Previous rates are based on students' attendance on two nominated days.*

Source: OAG

In 2006 DET improved the method for collecting attendance information and now calculates attendance rates using individual student attendance for all days in semester one. Students must attend at least four hours per day (two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon) to be considered to have attended a full day. WA's attendance data covers all types of absences and enables DET to identify which students are at educational risk due to non-attendance.

Australian states and territories vary in how they collect data on, and calculate rates of, student attendance. So a direct comparison of other states' attendance rates with WA is indicative only. Attendance rates reported by other Australian states (excluding territories) for 2007 were between 92 per cent to 95 per cent for primary school students compared to 93 per cent in WA. Rates for secondary school students were 87 to 92 per cent in other states and 88 per cent for WA students.

## Non-attendance is putting over a quarter of students at educational risk

In 2008, over a quarter of students were considered at educational risk because they did not attend school regularly. The total number of students at educational risk due to poor attendance grew by almost 2 700 (six per cent) from 2007 to 2008, despite overall student numbers remaining steady.

DET ranks 'educational risk' based upon attendance (figure 3), where:

- between 90 to 100 per cent attendance (a student misses half a day or less of schooling a week) is regarded as 'regular attendance' with absences causing minimal risk to the child's education
- between 80 to 89 per cent attendance (misses up to one full day per week) causes 'indicated' educational risk
- between 60 to 79 per cent attendance (misses between one to two days per week) causes 'moderate' educational risk
- less than 60 per cent attendance (misses more than two days per week) causes 'severe' educational risk.

Level of educational risk (based on attendance)	2007		2008	
	Number of students	%	Number of students	%
Regular attendance (90 – 100% attendance)	131 387	74.0	128 227	72.4
<b>At indicated risk (80 – 89% attendance)</b>	<b>30 040</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>31 881</b>	<b>18.0</b>
<b>At moderate risk (60 – 79% attendance)</b>	<b>11 157</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>11 709</b>	<b>6.6</b>
<b>At severe risk (0 – 59% attendance)</b>	<b>5 036</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>5 335</b>	<b>3.0</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>177 620</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>177 152</b>	<b>100</b>

**Figure 3: Educational risk profile of WA public school students, based on attendance in 2007 and 2008**

Some 48 925 students were at educational risk due to poor attendance in 2008, an increase of 2 692 students over 2007. As well, the number of students in each risk category increased from 2007 to 2008.

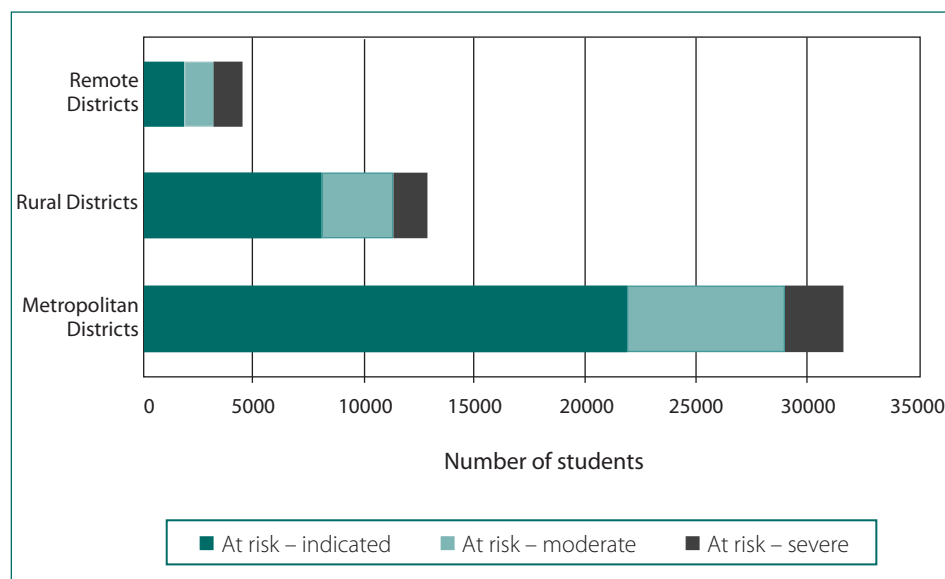
Source: OAG

Attendance is one indicator of educational risk. Under DET's *Students at educational risk* policy, students who miss more than half a day of school a week (less than 90 per cent attendance) are considered at risk for lowered academic performance, reflecting the findings of the two WA Child Health Surveys (1997 and 2006).

Data on attendance rates and the proportion of students at educational risk due to poor attendance for each school district are given in appendix one.

### The greatest numbers of students at educational risk due to poor attendance are non-Indigenous students in metropolitan schools

Of the 48 925 students at educational risk in 2008, 31 659 (65 per cent) are in metropolitan schools, 12 750 (26 per cent) in rural schools and 4 516 (nine per cent) in remote schools (figure 4). But a greater proportion of students in rural and remote areas are at educational risk. Non-Indigenous students make up 81 per cent of all students at educational risk in 2008.



**Figure 4: Total number of students at educational risk by location and risk category in 2008**  
*Some 25 per cent of metropolitan students are at educational risk based on their level of attendance in 2008. But a greater proportion of students in rural and remote areas are at educational risk (32 per cent in rural districts and 50 per cent in remote districts).*

Source: OAG

Poor school attendance is a significant issue for a large number of non-Indigenous students:

- They are the majority (81 per cent) of students at educational risk due to poor attendance.
- Almost 40 000 non-Indigenous students, including more than 28 400 in the metropolitan area, went to school less than 90 per cent of days in 2008 (figure 5). In comparison, more than 9 300 Indigenous students went to school less than 90 per cent of the time.
- The number of non-Indigenous students at educational risk through poor attendance grew by 6.6 per cent in 2008 compared with a 2.5 per cent increase amongst Indigenous students.

Region	Regular	At risk – indicated	At risk – moderate	At risk – severe	Total
Metropolitan	93 749	20 543	6 146	1 778	122 216 (75%)
Rural	25 549	6 925	2 070	528	35 072 (22%)
Remote	3 417	1 127	397	69	5 010 (3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>122 715 (76%)</b>	<b>28 595 (18%)</b>	<b>8 613 (5%)</b>	<b>2 375 (1.5%)</b>	<b>162 298 (100%)</b>

**Figure 5: Non-Indigenous students by region and level of educational risk in 2008**

*Large numbers of non-Indigenous students are at educational risk due to non-attendance, especially in the Perth metropolitan area.*

Source: OAG

### **A high proportion of Indigenous students have low levels of attendance, making them over twice as likely to be at educational risk**

Only 37 per cent of Indigenous students attended school regularly in 2008 (figure 6). This 37 per cent showed the same level of attendance as the 76 per cent of non-Indigenous students who attend regularly.

Amongst the 63 per cent of Indigenous students considered at risk due to non-attendance, the proportion at moderate or severe risk is much higher than amongst non-Indigenous students. For example, 20 per cent of Indigenous students were considered at severe risk due to attending school less than 60 per cent of the time in 2008, compared with 1.5 per cent of non-Indigenous students.

Forty per cent of the Indigenous students at severe educational risk were in remote districts (Kimberley and Pilbara).

Region	Regular	At risk – indicated	At risk – moderate	At risk - severe	Total
Metropolitan	2 649	1 333	1 056	803	5 841 (39%)
Rural	1 813	1 135	1 113	979	5 040 (34%)
Remote	1 050	818	927	1 178	3 973 (27%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>5 512 (37%)</b>	<b>3 286 (22%)</b>	<b>3 096 (21%)</b>	<b>2 960 (20%)</b>	<b>14 854 (100%)</b>

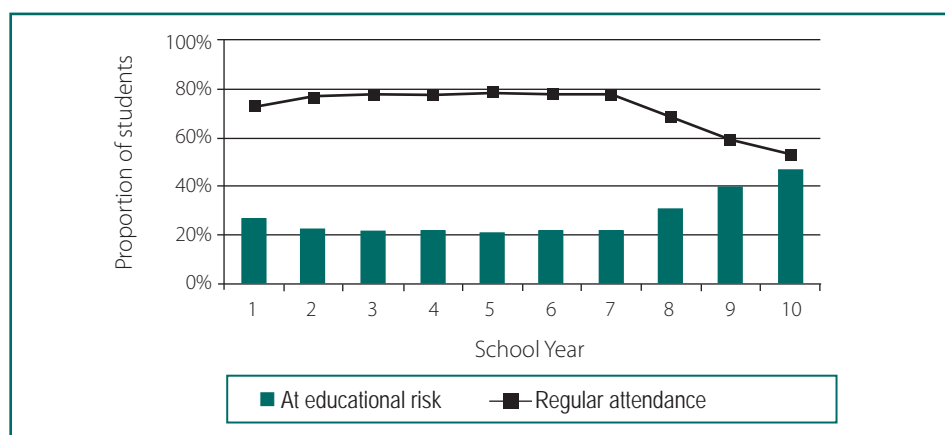
**Figure 6: Indigenous students by region and level of educational risk in 2008**

A significant proportion (63 per cent) of Indigenous students is considered to be at educational risk due to their level of attendance.

Source: OAG

### Attendance declines significantly in public secondary schools but not in private schools. By Year 10 only 53 per cent of public students attend regularly

Student attendance decreases sharply in secondary school. In 2008, only 53 per cent of Year 10 students in WA public schools attended school regularly. Regular attendance in primary school holds fairly steady at around 78 per cent of students but drops significantly in Year 8 (69 per cent), Year 9 (60 per cent) and Year 10 (53 per cent), (see figure 7). There are many factors affecting attendance but DET does not know which are key to the fall in attendance during Years 8 to 10. The trend in WA is similar to other Australian jurisdictions. Private schools do not show the same trend in attendance in secondary school (figure 8).



**Figure 7: Proportion of students who are at educational risk and the proportion of students who regularly attended school by year in 2008**

Regular school attendance substantially reduces during secondary school with a proportional increase in the number of students at educational risk.

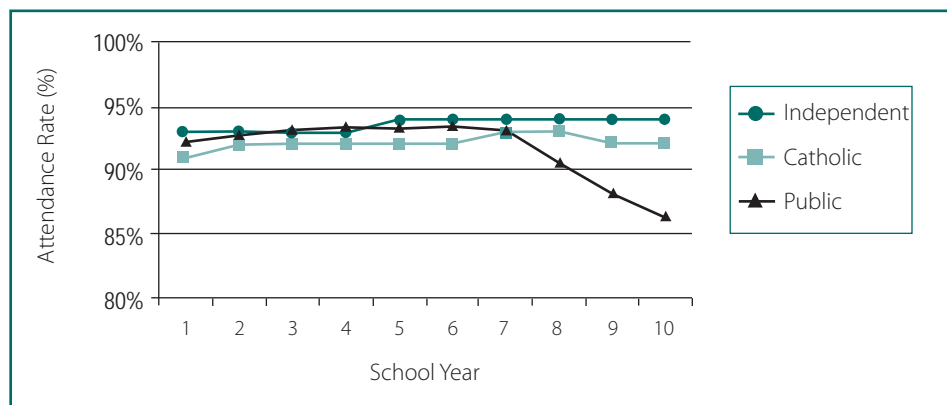
Source: OAG

The proportion of students that attended school regularly fell between 2006 and 2008 across all school years reviewed. For example, 56 per cent of Year 10 students attended school regularly in 2006 compared to 53 per cent in 2008.

Indigenous students show a similar trend across school years to non-Indigenous students. In both groups attendance drops-off in Years 8 to 10, causing an associated rise in educational risk.

However, Indigenous students show a significantly lower rate of attendance in each school year. The proportion of Indigenous students that attend regularly is approximately half of the rate for non-Indigenous students. For instance, by Year 10, only 20 per cent of Indigenous students attend school regularly compared to 56 per cent of non-Indigenous students.

WA's private schools do not show the same decline in attendance rates in secondary school. The recent *National report on schooling in Australia 2007* shows that attendance rates during Years 8 to 10 in 2007 remained steady in Catholic and independent schools (figure 8). It is not clear why private schools manage to maintain their attendance rate in secondary school.



**Figure 8: Attendance rates by school year for WA's independent, Catholic and public schools in 2007**

*The drop-off in student attendance rates in Years 8 to 10 occurs in public schools but not in independent and Catholic schools.*

Source: OAG

## Poor attendance wastes educational services

### Education services are not fully utilised

In 2008 absent students missed out on some \$185 million worth of public school education as they were not at school. When a child is away from school, the public investment in their education is still provided, but it is not received by the student. DET reported that in 2007-08 the average cost of providing public school education was \$10 857 per primary school student (\$57 per day) and \$13 708 per secondary school student (\$72 per day).

For instance, students who attend less than 60 per cent of the time at secondary school miss out on education costing around \$5 600 each year, compared with the average loss of \$1 371 each year for secondary students who attend regularly. The total estimated cost of the education missed by the 5 335 students in the lowest category of attendance is around \$24 million in 2008. Higher rates of attendance would reduce this.

### Returning non-attendees can incur additional costs

Students who are persistent non-attendees need additional services to get them back to school and to help them catch up. Their return can also adversely affect the learning of other students once they return to the classroom.

Once back at school, persistent non-attendees are likely to require additional assistance in order to address the literacy and numeracy problems which have developed due to missing school. In one school visited, this involved the creation of a transition class for returning absentee students, featuring a high student-teacher ratio and highly structured tuition.

Schools and district offices advise that persistent non-attendees often display behavioural issues on returning to school, especially if they also have literacy and numeracy problems. Behavioural problems are a significant issue in WA public schools. For instance, almost 10 000 students were suspended from WA public schools in 2008 due to behavioural problems, and the 2009-10 State Budget allocated \$46 million over four years to address behavioural issues in public schools.

# Gaps in DET's current approach to improving attendance reduce its effectiveness

## Findings

- *DET has a strategy and policy to manage attendance and its approach works for students who are occasionally absent but not for those who are persistently absent.*
- *Few schools have improved attendance over the past three years.*
- *Schools met one third of the attendance targets that they set themselves.*
- *DET's attendance policy and strategies are not based on a good understanding of the major causes for why students do not go to school. Unless strategies address the causes, school attendance will not improve.*
- *A lack of guidance on the different levels of non-attendance which should trigger increased action leads to inconsistency in when and how schools and districts respond to non-attendance. As a result students may not get the support they need when they need it.*
- *DET has not given attendance the same priority as other indicators of educational risk. However, it is evident since the commencement of this examination that attendance has started to receive greater attention.*
- *DET's approach does not address common causes and risk factors so the potential to drive state-wide initiatives or to tackle specific groups of students is lost.*
- *Districts and schools are not coping well with the numbers of students at risk.*
- *District offices and schools do not have the information systems they need to do their job effectively. For instance, district offices have to contact schools to get timely information on individual and school attendance.*
- *DET rarely uses its last resort options of attendance panels and prosecutions.*
- *DET has improved its processes to locate children who stop coming to school, but schools do not always follow these processes.*
- *Addressing the causes of poor attendance sometimes needs the involvement of other agencies, but schools and districts lack clear guidance on when and how to engage these agencies.*
- *Successful strategies developed by schools or districts are not captured and replicated, so DET does not know which interventions are effective and could be used more widely.*
- *Information from DET's annual attendance audit is not timely or widely available and hence is not used as effectively as it might for managing performance and trends.*
- *DET does not consistently use attendance to monitor schools' performance or to inform management.*

## Recommendations

The Department of Education and Training should:

- develop a better understanding of the causes of non-attendance and which student groups they most affect
- review its current attendance strategy to:
  - reflect the causes of non-attendance and key student groups affected
  - provide more specific guidelines on when and how schools and districts respond to non-attendance
  - provide evidence-based interventions that reflect the different student cohorts and the requirements of schools and districts
  - link attendance to other measures of educational risk
- improve the use of attendance as a key indicator of educational risk, including as an early signal of changes in student behaviour and academic performance
- improve the processes for dealing formally with parents and students for persistent failure to attend school, such as fast-tracking referral to attendance panels
- provide better tools and support to schools and districts to facilitate their access to services from other agencies to address persistent non-attendance
- ensure that a timely and comprehensive view of attendance data and issues is available to schools, districts and Central Office staff, including information for triggering and monitoring interventions
- ensure on a regular basis that schools are implementing the attendance strategy and policy and are responding appropriately and consistently to low attendance
- set and regularly monitor targets for student attendance, including an overall state target
- evaluate and review interventions addressing attendance, to identify and replicate good practice across districts and schools.

## DET has a strategy and policy to manage attendance

DET has identified student attendance as an issue that requires management. It has set up a range of mechanisms across schools, districts and Central Office to monitor attendance and manage students where their attendance falls below 90 per cent.

DET's approach to managing attendance includes:

- school-level interventions such as attendance plans and case management of individual students
- specialised staff (attendance officers in district offices and some schools)
- district attendance forums for districts to share models and strategies for improving attendance
- student tracking system
- an attendance strategy (2006):
  - an attendance audit of all public schools
  - a resource package for schools
  - a one-off grant to district education offices to support delivery of attendance services
  - community posters and parental brochures
  - district attendance officer support to private schools
  - prosecution of parents and students when all other strategies have failed.

The resource package advises schools that planning to improve attendance needs to occur at a range of levels across the school, from whole of school approaches through to targeted approaches for groups and individuals to casework with individual students. It promotes a graduated response to attendance from promotion and universal prevention through to individual casework for managing the most severely at risk. The package includes examples of what some schools and staff have done to improve attendance. It does not give schools key strategies for improving attendance, such as for identified cohorts of students. DET recently released a similar package for district offices.

DET's attendance policy outlines the steps that a school should take to encourage an individual student to attend school regularly and to manage non-attendance, including:

- monitor non-attendance and further investigate why, if a student's attendance falls below 90 per cent over a term
- referral to an attendance panel for advice and support to parents and students with non-attendance issues

- refer students to the children's whereabouts unknown list when they cannot be located after 15 or so school days
- implement and document what they have done to improve a student's attendance.

The growing number of students with persistent non-attendance and at educational risk, especially below 60 per cent, indicates that these interventions are having only a limited impact.

### DET's approach works for students who are occasionally absent but not for those who are persistently absent

DET's current approach to attendance works for the majority of students who are occasionally absent, but DET has not been successful in addressing persistent non-attendance.

Schools reported to us that they can adequately manage most absences, but require additional support in addressing those students whose persistent non-attendance places them at risk of under-achieving. The increase in students with attendance below 90 per cent indicates that DET's standard approaches are not working. Figure 9 shows where current strategies and policies are not successfully addressing poor attendance.

	Attendance indicator	Current response	Outcomes for 2008
☑	Regular Attendance	School documents and monitors daily absences	<b>Desired outcome achieved</b> for 72% of students
↓	Attendance drops below 90%	School intervenes to restore attendance	<b>Not working</b> at most schools. More than 90% of schools have not managed to consistently improve attendance in the past two years
↓	Attendance continues below 90%	School formally refers to district office	<b>Not working.</b> District office case loads are often so high they cannot contribute what is needed
↓	Poor Attendance continues	Convene attendance panel	<b>Not working.</b> Seldom used and ineffective
↓	Attendance not resolved	Prosecute parents	<b>Not used</b>

**Figure 9: Outcomes of DET's current response to non-attendance**

*DET's incremental strategy for addressing continuing non-attendance is not working.*

Source: OAG

### Schools met one-third of the attendance targets that they set themselves

To assist schools to improve attendance rates, DET requires them to set one or more targets for attendance in the coming year and plan to achieve those targets. Schools met a third of the targets they set themselves (figure 10).

2008 performance	Number of targets	% of targets set
Targets achieved	590	33.6
Targets not achieved	1 025	58.4
Targets not assessable	141	8.0

**Figure 10: Schools' performance against their own attendance targets**

Since 2006, DET has required schools to set their own annual targets for attendance and to report their performance to Central Office.

Source: DET

Despite the targets, attendance at 30 per cent of schools fell between 2006 and 2008 while just nine per cent improved attendance over both years (figure 11).

Change from prior year	2006 to 2007	2007 to 2008	Number of schools
Consistent improvement in attendance	increase	increase	71 (9.4%)
Consistent decrease in attendance	decrease	decrease	225 (29.9%)
Mixed outcomes	increase (or decrease)	decrease (or increase)	457 (60.7%)

**Figure 11: Changes in attendance rates each year since 2006**

Only 71 schools managed to improve their attendance rate in both of the past two years while 225 schools recorded a decrease in student attendance. The remaining 457 schools had mixed results.

Source: OAG

## **DET's attendance policy and strategies are not based on a good understanding of the major causes for why students do not go to school**

DET has not developed a good understanding of why students do not attend school regularly. Schools may know why an individual student does not attend, but DET does not know the most significant causes affecting overall trends or groups of students. Without this understanding, DET will find it difficult to develop effective strategies or to target its interventions.

While independent research has identified broad causes for persistent non-attendance, such as family dysfunction, learning difficulties, and social or emotional issues, DET does not know which causes are driving non-attendance and which are the most significant. It does not know what factors affect students across all school years or only specific groups and ages in WA.

DET's data systems also do not allow it to track individual students centrally and so recognise the patterns of non-attendance. This limits DET's understanding of how students' attendance changes over time and the possible causes. Further DET cannot easily identify those students most at risk due to poor attendance and how their attendance changes over time, particularly if they change schools. To undertake such analysis would require time consuming manual interrogation of the data.

For instance, DET does not know if the students who are persistent non-attendees in the early years of primary school are the same individuals with low attendance in Years 6 and 7. As the rate of attendance is almost constant across primary school it is possible that strategies to address the problems of those students in the first few years of school will have a lasting impact during their school years.

DET also does not know why attendance declines in high school. Most other Australian states also report a decline in attendance rates in high schools. However, this decline is not evident in private schools.

DET's management information systems do not allow it to fully understand and monitor student attendance and its relationship to other indicators of educational risk. For instance, DET cannot easily match a student's attendance rate with their academic performance or information on any behavioural issues. DET has advised that upgrades to their Student Information System database over the next few years should allow real time monitoring of attendance data.

## **Inconsistency in when and how schools and districts respond to non-attendance means students may not get the support they need when they need it**

### **DET has not given attendance the same priority as other indicators of educational risk**

In 2006 DET launched its state-wide attendance strategy, and announced a stronger focus on attendance. Despite falling attendance rates since 2006, DET's priorities as listed in its directions for schools (*Focus 2008* and *Focus 2009*) do not include attendance. DET no longer centrally coordinates its approach and strategy for the three key areas of educational risk: academic achievement, behaviour and attendance.

DET has identified student behaviour and literacy and numeracy as priorities for 2009. But if a student is not at school then they will not benefit from the programs and resources targeted at improving these areas.

The lower emphasis on attendance is also reflected in DET's funding allocation to each school. Factors in this allocation include behaviour and literacy and numeracy levels but does not reflect attendance. DET has advised that they plan to include attendance as a priority in their *Focus 2010*.

In 1998 DET set up a framework for managing educational risk. Until 2004, this framework was provided by the *Students at educational risk* policy and the accompanying *Making the difference strategy*. The strategy outlines a comprehensive and coordinated approach to providing for students at educational risk in government schools.

Both the strategy and policy are still in place but DET no longer centrally links its initiatives and strategies for dealing with educational risk. Rather, each is managed independently. Attendance is not used as a lead indicator of students who are likely to become at educational risk.

### **Schools and districts do not have clear guidance on how and when to respond to poor attendance so they may not provide the right response at the right time**

Neither DET's attendance policy nor strategy set out clear expectations of what actions should be triggered when attendance falls below certain levels. This leaves responses to the judgement of individual schools and means there is limited assurance that students with the same attendance problems will receive consistent and effective responses.

DET has also not clearly set out its expectations to schools and districts. For instance, neither the attendance strategy nor policy set targets for attendance. DET does not monitor schools to ensure they are implementing and complying with the attendance policy so it has no assurance that they are following up and dealing with student absence as required.

As shown at figure 9, DET's strategy is for a graduated response to attendance from a whole of school approach to improve attendance to the case management of individual students. But it is left up to schools when to apply the different levels of intervention.

For instance, under DET's policy if a student's attendance falls below 90 per cent over a 10-week period, schools must further investigate the reasons why. The policy also requires schools to use case management for attendance issues. But what action is expected when attendance falls below 60 per cent is not suggested, so there are no specific links between an escalating problem and a more intensive intervention.

This means that district offices and schools will vary in how and when they respond to persistent non-attendance. For instance higher levels of non-attendance may be tolerated in areas where overall attendance rates are poor, but quickly addressed in others.

Having this latitude in the process means it is also more difficult to monitor whether the level of intervention by schools and referral to district attendance officers has been appropriate, as each is a subjective judgement.

DET has advised that the new attendance strategy is planned to include additional training for schools and the community to address poor attendance.

### **DET's approach does not address common causes and risk factors so the potential to drive state-wide initiatives or to tackle specific groups of students is lost**

DET does not have broad-based interventions to address common causes and risk factors for non-attendance. Rather, its attendance policy focuses on the process for managing an individual student's attendance. Further, DET's attendance strategy is essentially the resource package for schools that contains no specific strategies and has only limited examples of effective approaches.

For instance, DET does not provide any state-wide or targeted initiatives to schools or districts to address the decline in attendance in secondary school.

The need for strategies that provide a more targeted approach to non-attendance amongst specific groups of students is clear. Such strategies should be supported by evidence that shows them to have worked in certain WA schools or other jurisdictions. Developing such targeted strategies should be done centrally by DET.

## **Districts and schools are not coping well with the numbers of students at risk**

District offices advised that they were unable to respond to the sheer number of students with persistent non-attendance because the level of resourcing is not matched to the demand from schools and students for support.

Under DET policy, schools can formally refer a student's case to the district office where their attendance falls below 90 per cent and the school has exhausted all avenues to address the problem. DET does not fund districts based on the level of persistent non-attendance.

DET considers that the complexity of student's issues increases with their level of non-attendance and therefore a more intensive response is needed. Under DET's policy, district offices assist schools to case-manage individual students who have not responded to the school's interventions.

In 2008, DET employed 41 district attendance officers including 15 located in high risk schools. These 41 officers supported a student population of 177 000, 49 000 of whom are at educational risk due to non-attendance. In one district this equated to 354 severely at-risk students per district attendance officer.

Caseloads vary significantly but are generally high. Based just on the 5 335 students at severe risk, caseloads range from 31 to 354 per attendance officer. In the largest of the four metropolitan districts, each district attendance officer carries an average caseload of 267 students. The average caseload is 185 for metropolitan and 102 for rural and remote attendance officers.

The high caseload means that district attendance officers are generally not well placed to intervene early as a student's attendance falls. There are 11 700 students with attendance rates between 60 and 80 per cent and a more intensive response at that stage may prevent further deterioration in their attendance. Taking on these students, however, would triple the average caseload for each district attendance officer.

Schools are mostly responsible for intervening with the 31 800 students whose attendance is between 80 and 90 per cent.

District attendance staff may support the school by offering advice, investigating the situation further and/or being involved in case conferences. The school is the case manager at all times and is required to work collaboratively with the district-based staff member. They are authorised to deal with enrolment and attendance issues, as set out in the Act. They also support private schools with their specialist knowledge if needed.

The district attendance officer roles vary amongst districts, but DET has not assessed how best to utilise this role. We noted that the Kimberley region, with 10 attendance officers in individual schools, was one of the few regions to improve its overall attendance rates in the last two years. But without review, DET cannot know if this is due to the number of attendance officers, their placement in schools or other factors outside the education system.

## **District offices and schools do not have the information systems they need to do their job effectively**

District offices and schools lack the information systems they need to effectively monitor and manage school attendance.

District office staff are unable to independently monitor attendance at schools. To review attendance at a school, district offices must either rely on attendance audit data that may be over a year old, or contact the school to have more recent information sent to them.

As attendance is both a cause and indicator of educational risk, we expected DET's information systems would provide adequate information on, and monitoring of, attendance at student, school, district and state level. We also expected that DET would be able to compare attendance with other risk factors such as academic achievement and behaviour for each student and track trends across schools, districts and the state.

In response, some district offices and schools have developed their own tools. For instance, a number of district offices have created their own spreadsheets and manually combined data from three separate databases to monitor student attendance, behaviour, and academic achievement. However, they are unable to monitor electronically whether schools are managing a student with persistent non-attendance and must contact the school to find out.

We also noted that the current attendance system does not trigger a warning when a student's attendance falls below set levels, even though 90 per cent is the key threshold for action specified in DET policy. Such a warning would help ensure a response is provided. This means that the timing of schools' response to persistent non-attendance is likely to vary, depending on when the school notices that attendance has fallen below the threshold.

DET plans to introduce an attendance data system which addresses this, although the timeframe has not been established.

We also expected that DET would be able to centrally monitor if schools are taking action to address attendance for each student when it falls below a certain level, in line with DET policy. For example, DET does not know whether the 5 335 students with attendance rates below 60 per cent are being case-managed or not.

Schools reported that individual cases can be 'lost' in the potentially complex and lengthy process leading up to referral to a panel. There is no information system for monitoring cases where an attendance panel has made recommendations that the student and their parent are expected to comply with to improve attendance. To address this one district reported setting up their own attendance panel database to track attendance cases through the panel stages.

While the school monitors the student's attendance after the panel hearing this may be interrupted if the child transfers to another school. There is no central system whereby this information can be easily accessed by the new school, unless the previous school forwards the student's files.

### **DET rarely uses its last resort options of attendance panels and prosecutions**

Under the Act, DET has two legal mechanisms for addressing persistent non-attendance: attendance panels and prosecution. Both are rarely used as the process is considered ineffective and resource intensive.

#### ***Attendance panels are rarely used***

Schools reported that they rarely use attendance panels, as they find the process long and often ineffective. Central Office is not able to report the success rate of the panels and how many students attend school regularly afterwards. Convening a panel is a necessary step before prosecution, but there is no system for monitoring whether the panel's advice and assistance is followed.

A student can be referred to an attendance panel when their attendance is persistently in breach of the Act and there is no reasonable excuse for this absence. The panels provide an impartial forum to review issues contributing to the student's non-attendance and give advice and assistance to the student and their parents. It is used only after schools and district offices have exhausted all reasonable avenues to improve a student's attendance.

DET can prosecute for non-attendance only where a child's case has been referred to an attendance panel and the panel has given advice or offered assistance and this has not been followed or accepted.

In 2007-08, 14 attendance panels were convened to consider 26 cases. Twelve panels were held in the metropolitan area. In 2008 there were 5 335 students whose attendance rate was below 60 per cent.

The number of attendance panels convened does not reflect the large number of students who do not attend regularly, or the increasing trend in non-attendance. Since 2001-02, the number of panels convened in one year has ranged from two to 25.

Schools and districts commented that they find the attendance panel process lengthy. It also requires the commitment of the student and their parents. DET is considering a 'fast-track' pathway for extreme cases of non-attendance as part of the new attendance strategy.

### ***Prosecutions under the Act only started in mid 2009***

As a last resort, DET can prosecute a parent for failing to ensure their child is attending school. In July 2009, DET commenced its first prosecution and is currently considering a further two cases against parents. Prosecution can lead to a fine of \$1 000 for the parents and \$10 for the child. DET is still setting up processes so that it can use the *Parental Support and Responsibility Act 2008* (Parental Support Act) as an alternative to prosecution.

Not prosecuting parents for their child's non-attendance means that DET does not enforce parents' statutory obligation, and parents who refuse to accept responsibility for their child's attendance at school do not face any immediate consequences. In many cases prosecution may not be the most effective incentive for encouraging attendance, but it is currently the only means under the Act.

DET has found that the process leading to prosecution is lengthy. In revising its attendance strategy, DET is now developing procedures with the Department of Child Protection to use Responsible Parenting Agreements and Responsible Parenting Orders by the Children's Court under the Parental Support Act.

This Act was passed in April 2008 but was not in force until March 2009. DET is still developing processes and has yet to train staff as authorised officers. The maximum penalty is \$200 if a parent fails to comply with the Responsible Parenting Order. A case has to go before an attendance panel before a Responsible Parenting Order can be pursued in the Children's Court.

### **DET has improved its processes to locate children who stop coming to school but schools do not always follow these processes**

DET has developed processes for children who are transient or who have not attended school for some days and cannot be contacted. We found that schools do not always follow DET's procedures for referring a student's name to the central register so that a more comprehensive search can be done across WA.

When a student leaves and the school has not received a transfer note from another school then the student is 'missing'. This is not an absent student whose location is known but one that cannot be located using usual school based contacts. Schools are to actively look for this student using their own, interagency and other DET resources available.

If a school cannot find a student within three weeks, then the school applies to Central Office to place their name on the list of children whose whereabouts are unknown.

DET reports that it has improved follow-up of students on this list across both private and public schools, daily cross matching of student names with the enrolments database and improved student identification. A unique student identifier would assist this.

To locate these students DET then circulates these names to all WA schools (public and private), and agencies such as the Department of Child Protection and juvenile justice officers each month during the school year. There are around 300 to 400 names on the list at any point in time. It covers any student who was enrolled in an educational program in WA.

Students may be particularly hard to find if their family has moved overseas or interstate. Checking with other states is limited as there is no agreement between states to exchange this information.

We found one school that was not following DET's processes and was recording almost 90 absent students as enrolled months after the students had stopped attending. Over 20 of these students were later found to have transferred to other schools. Some 30 students have now been added to the central list and the school is still following up on the rest.

This duplication creates a funding issue. If the duplication occurred during school census periods, then both schools would be funded for the same student.

#### **Good Practice: Tracking mobile students in remote areas**

DET has set up a system to track students who live in the Ngaanyatjarra lands in the remote eastern part of the Goldfields district. Given that the families of these students move regularly between communities, DET has adopted a multi-campus model for attendance. Attendance data is collected daily at each school (campus), and then combined to show the complete picture. By recognising the school sites as one, DET avoids the complexities of continual student transfers and re-enrolment.

DET should consider rolling this out more widely, say to the Pilbara and Kimberley.

#### ***The cause of student attendance problems sometimes requires the attention of other government agencies however schools and districts lack the guidance to know when and how to engage these agencies***

Schools and districts reported that it is difficult to get the support they need from other agencies for students whose poor attendance is due to reasons outside the school's control. DET does not consistently provide information on what services are available and in what circumstances and how to best access services from other agencies. It is left up to the individual and their own knowledge, experience and local relationships.

School staff advised that they cannot respond adequately to students' health and welfare issues which low attendance rates generally signal. Often these are the role of another agency. Without effective interagency cooperation, many causes of persistent non-attendance cannot be addressed.

Some schools reported that they made their own agreements with local agencies, non-government organisations and businesses. Support from other agencies is often built on personal networks. Central Office has not developed any policies or tools to support schools and districts building relationships with other agencies. This means that inter-agency cooperation mostly relies on ad hoc personal initiatives at the local level, which are then easily disrupted when staff are replaced or other priorities become more urgent.

DET has agreements in place to access some services provided by other agencies such as the Departments of Health and Child Protection. However, schools and districts cannot easily access information about these agreements. Examples of interagency agreements are provided at district attendance forums but the agreements are not available elsewhere such as on DET's intranet.

DET staff reported that it can be difficult to access services from other agencies. There are a number of reasons for this including the level of services available and whether students meet the other agency's criteria for receiving a service. DET intends that its new attendance strategy will include increased training and information on working with other agencies.

There are examples of good practice but these are not always implemented in other districts. For instance, the Interagency Case Management Team developed by one district includes a number of agencies such as the Western Australian Police and the Department of Housing. This approach reflects recommendations from the 2002 *Inquiry into the Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities*, but similar multi-agency teams are not yet in place in all districts.

Other issues impacting on effective interagency work include policy and technical barriers to sharing information, a lack of agreed mechanisms for funding inter-agency work, no process for agreeing which agency will lead, and differing regional boundaries.

Some metropolitan district offices employ staff from a range of disciplines, such as youth and social workers, to better deal with the range of problems that persistent non-attendees may have. DET is trialling collocation of several agencies on several Perth school sites. This has yet to be extended to rural and remote areas.

## DET needs better systems for monitoring and evaluating success

### **Successful strategies developed by schools or districts are not captured and replicated, so DET does not know which interventions are effective and could be used more widely**

Central Office does not evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives addressing attendance developed by schools or district offices. Instead, they rely on individual district offices and schools for both service delivery and program review. This means that DET does not know which of the many interventions are effective and so could be used by other similar schools.

Not all schools are the same and certain interventions will be more effective in some than others. Knowing why an intervention works and in what circumstances is important.

Some schools and district offices we visited had developed innovative programs to address both occasional and persistent non-attendance. These interventions need to be reviewed or evaluated to identify good practice that could be used elsewhere. This state-wide evaluation is not done, so effective initiatives are often in place in only a few schools, or lost when key staff leave.

We found some examples of innovative practice in a number of the schools and districts we visited. Most are not widespread across the state or education district:

- Engaging parents in education: The Capacity Building Training for Parents program in Canning district involved more than 550 parents from more than 20 local schools. It successfully engaged families with the message that 'good education is the key to a better future', building closer relationships between families and the local schools. This program only has temporary funding.
- Community partnerships to keep students in school: Some schools and district offices broker agreements with local businesses to stop school-aged children being served at fast-food outlets and shopping centres during school hours. This reduces the appeal of missing school to 'hang out at the mall'. There is a memorandum of understanding with the Office of Crime Prevention for this initiative but some schools are not aware of the support available to them in carrying forward this initiative.

- Support for attendance: Some schools encourage attendance by offering dedicated bus services to find and transport children to school, 'welcome rooms' with showers and clean clothes for students, school breakfasts supported by community organisations, and dedicated transition classes for persistently absent students re-entering the classroom environment.
- School incentive schemes for good attendance: These include rewards such as access to the school pool or recreation room, free lunches, and certificates of commendation.
- Staffing: Schools obtain external funding to employ community liaison officers, nursing staff, chaplains and day care staff, in order to respond to students' needs.

### **Information from DET's annual attendance audit is not timely or widely available**

DET's annual attendance audit does not adequately support monitoring and decision-making by schools, district offices and Central Office. The audit is of student attendance during semester one only. The data is uploaded into the Student Attendance Monitoring database in August each year.

Schools record student attendance and enter it onto the school information system daily. A school can then access this information as they need to but cannot compare their performance with another school until the attendance audit is released.

Since 2006, DET has conducted and reported an annual audit of school attendance for all WA public schools, providing attendance data over semester one for each student, school and district within the state. The overall attendance rate is calculated using this audit.

DET uploads semester one data each August. School, district and central staff can then access this information and run reports to assist with planning and target setting.

The attendance audit data is also available to district staff, who may request detailed reports at a student, school and district level, according to need. But a district or school can only compare their performance with a similar district or school that has been provided for comparison.

In April 2008, DET's executive received a high-level report based on the audit data collected in August the previous year.

### **DET does not consistently use attendance to monitor schools' performance or to inform management**

Both school standards reviews and principals' performance agreements are used to assess a school's performance including attendance. But attendance is not systematically targeted or reported in these reviews. This limits the information available centrally on attendance, including to DET's executive.

District directors review schools in their area every one to three years, depending on the school's performance. While these school standards reviews usually address attendance, there is seldom reference to an attendance target. The subsequent report to Central Office does not include attendance data although it is potentially a lead indicator of student and school performance.

This means that the reviews do not produce readily comparable information between schools and districts. Only academic achievement is reported in a comparable way to Central Office for each school.

While schools set their own attendance targets with the assistance of district offices, it is rare for a district office to set a formal attendance target for school principals to address within their performance agreement. Performance agreements are a key way DET sets targets for a school. They are formed by consultation between a district director and a school principal.

Only four of the 28 agreements we sampled referred to attendance and only one included a measurable attendance target. Attendance was not mentioned in any of the agreements sampled in three of the seven districts we reviewed. These targets do not link directly to the information reported in the school standards reviews.

Information from school and principal reviews is not given to the central Attendance Unit responsible for developing DET's strategy and policy on attendance.

DET has advised that it intends to include the assessment of attendance as a requirement for the Director's Standards Review of each school and the principal's performance management in its new attendance strategy.

## Appendix 1 – Summary Statistics by School District

As part of our examination we analysed DET's student attendance data for semester one, 2008. This summary provides a high-level view of key attendance statistics for each district. It includes both primary and secondary public schools and students enrolled in Years 1 to 10.

District region	District name	Number of schools	Number of students	Average attendance rate <sup>(1)</sup>	Students that attend more than 90% of the time <sup>(2)</sup> (regular attendance)	Students at educational risk based on attendance <sup>(3)</sup>
Metropolitan districts	Canning	103	26 095	91.8%	73.5%	26.5%
	Fremantle-Peel	131	40 427	92.2%	74.7%	25.3%
	Swan	99	26 555	91.6%	73.9%	26.1%
	West Coast	117	34 980	93.1%	78.4%	21.6%
<b>Metropolitan districts Total</b>		<b>450</b>	<b>128 057</b>	<b>92.2%</b>	<b>75.3%</b>	<b>24.7%</b>
Rural districts	Albany	24	5 019	90.8%	68.9%	31.1%
	Bunbury	37	9 119	91.2%	71.0%	29.0%
	Esperance	21	2 539	91.4%	72.1%	27.9%
	Goldfields	24	4 490	85.7%	58.1%	41.9%
	Midlands	42	4 216	91.0%	71.3%	28.7%
	Mid West	51	6 156	87.6%	60.3%	39.7%
	Narrogin	28	3 401	90.9%	71.2%	28.8%
	Warren-Blackwood	25	5 172	92.3%	74.4%	25.6%
<b>Rural districts Total</b>		<b>252</b>	<b>40 112</b>	<b>90.1%</b>	<b>68.2%</b>	<b>31.8%</b>
Remote districts	Kimberley	23	3 582	80.5%	45.6%	54.4%
	Pilbara	28	5 401	84.1%	52.5%	47.5%
<b>Remote districts Total</b>		<b>51</b>	<b>8 983</b>	<b>82.6%</b>	<b>49.7%</b>	<b>50.3%</b>
<b>Overall Total</b>		<b>753</b>	<b>177 152</b>	<b>91.3%</b>	<b>72.4%</b>	<b>27.6%</b>

- Note: (1) Attendance rate is a ratio of the total number of days attended divided by the total number of available school days for all students in a district.
- (2) The percentage of students with regular attendance is based on the proportion of students in a district with an attendance rate of between 90 to 100 per cent.
- (3) Students at educational risk is the proportion of students in a district with an attendance rate below 90 per cent.

Source: OAG

# Reports of the Auditor General

## 2009

Opinion on Ministerial Notification: Ministerial Decision to not Provide Information to Parliament – Country Age Pension Fuel Card	19 August 2009
Second Public Sector Performance Report – Dangerous Goods Safety – Compliance in Western Australia’s Commercial and Recreational Fisheries	25 June 2009
Maintaining the State Road Network	17 June 2009
Rich and Rare: Conservation of Threatened Species	10 June 2009
Coming, Ready or Not: Preparing for Large-scale Emergencies	20 May 2009
Audit Results Report – 31 December 2008 Assurance Audits and other audits completed since 3 November 2008	6 May 2009
Information Systems Audit Report	8 April 2009
Public Sector Performance Report 2009 – Management of Water Resources in Western Australia – Follow-up – Administration of the Metropolitan Region Scheme by the Department for Planning and Infrastructure – Management of Fringe Benefits Tax	1 April 2009

**The above reports can be accessed on the Office of the Auditor General’s website at [www.audit.wa.gov.au](http://www.audit.wa.gov.au)**

**On request these reports may be made available in an alternative format for those with visual impairment.**