



Department of
Education

Shaping the future

Commissioned Inquiry

Halls Creek District High School

Confidential
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Inquiry Team

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Halls Creek District High School

Commissioned Inquiry

Foreword

On giving effect to the Ombudsman's recommendations arising from Child Death Reviews, the Department of Education responded by establishing individual attendance plans for all children at severe attendance risk, defined as having an attendance rate of less than 60 per cent.

This was to be achieved by the end of Semester 1, 2020. At this same time, like most schools, Halls Creek District High School was confronted with the COVID-19 world-wide pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic affected a significant number of families, many of whom decided the best way to protect their children was to go On Country and remain there for part, if not all, of Semester 1 and beyond.

It was during this time, March 2020, that discussions between the Department's executives and Statewide Services (SWS) began with the Kimberley Education Regional Office and Halls Creek District High School as to how best to deliver on the Ombudsman's recommendation.

The Department's agreement to action the recommendation was preceded by discussions surrounding the feasibility of the task, both in terms of its magnitude, and the extent to which there was confidence that individual attendance plans prepared on the scale required would achieve the outcome desired.

Additionally, the likelihood of the task being achieved within the specified timeframe was hindered by the significant impact of COVID-19 in Halls Creek at that time.

The appointment of an acting Principal at the beginning of Term 1, 2020 (initially for a four-week period), from outside the Kimberley region added to the layers of complexity to be overcome in order to successfully achieve the task.

Despite the acting Principal's tenure being extended to the end of Semester 1, 2020, and the return of a school leader from annual leave at the beginning of Term 2, 2020, with so few students in attendance the prospect of completing the task became even more difficult.

Successful school initiatives such as the task required of the school at the time, are frequently defined by the extent to which there are high-quality communication and consultation processes. With these in place, there is greater assurance of creating both clarity of expectations among staff, and trusting, culturally respectful partnerships with families.

With the benefit of hindsight, and in spite of the challenges outlined above, it is evident that actions could have been initiated in the early months of 2020 preceding writing of the plans in Term 3.

Progressively engaging with families returning to the town in the latter part of Term 2 to explain the intentions behind preparing the attendance plans and how community members could have a voice in supporting their children's return to school emerged consistently as a key piece of advice from those working with families on a daily basis.

The recommendations outlined in this report are designed to offer strategic and operational options to be considered in conjunction with the current Halls Creek District High School attendance strategy, underpinned by authentic consultation with families and community members.

Methodology

The methodology employed for the Inquiry included:

- a desktop review of information and communications pertaining to the Department's response to the Ombudsman's report in 2020.
- a range of interviews framed by the Terms of Reference
Note: during the period between arranging the interviews and arriving in Halls Creek, a number of interviewees subsequently advised they were in COVID isolation. Some agreed to a telephone interview.
- Interviewees were identified and interviewed in the following order
 - Group 1 – Central and Statewide Services staff
 - Group 2 – Kimberley Education Regional Office staff
 - Group 3 – Halls Creek District High School staff
 - Group 4 – Community members/representatives

Following the Inquiry team's visit to Halls Creek and subsequent discussions, it was determined that a further effort be made to have face-to-face interviews with those who had been unable to meet with the Inquiry team. To that end, the Inquiry team returned to Halls Creek on Tuesday 9 August 2022.

Terms of Reference

In March 2020, the Department of Education initiated the development of individual attendance plans for all students deemed to be at severe attendance risk at Halls Creek District High School. These were defined as students with an attendance rate of less than 60%. This task was to be completed by the end of July 2020.

The Department's Student Attendance in Public Schools policy in 2020, stated:

"The Department of Education monitors and manages student attendance in order to maximise the opportunities for all students to learn."

As a result of the review and recommendations of the Student Attendance in Public Schools policy and procedures, both were amended to provide greater clarity and specificity. Administrative and nomenclature changes between July 2020 and July 2021 were also made but are not necessarily reflected in the tracked changes.

On 9 June 2022, the Public School Accountability directorate was commissioned to undertake an Inquiry into the development, monitoring and communication processes relating to student attendance planning at Halls Creek District High School in 2020.

In particular, the Inquiry considered:

1. The structure and scale of the planning relating to the preparation of student attendance plans (SAPs) at Halls Creek District High School in 2020.
2. The moderation of the standard of planning, including format, detail, and parent engagement.
3. The implementation and follow-up of each student attendance plan, including, but not limited to, engagement with in-school and/or external agency services and monitoring of student attendance rates.
4. The chain of accountability and responsibility for the 'sign-off' for each plan.
5. The level of experience, knowledge and skill required to prepare SAPs, and the level of experience, knowledge and skill held by those who prepared the plans in July 2020.
6. The criteria applied to determine the impact of the attendance planning that led to the public announcements of improvements in student attendance at Halls Creek District High School in August 2020, which was subsequently challenged.

Key Themes

Planning strategy and implementation

Terms of Reference 1

Consider the structure and scale of the planning relating to the preparation of SAPs at Halls Creek District High School in 2020.

- There was no documented evidence of a clear planning strategy at the Kimberley Education Regional Office (KERO). Similar feedback was received during the school visit.
- Our investigation found there wasn't 'single point of accountability' established to assume responsibility for preparing and overseeing a strategy to operationalise the Ombudsman's recommendation.
- With many families leaving Halls Creek to protect their children, fearing the advancing spread of COVID-19 in Term 1, 2020, the department missed an opportunity to pause and rethink the approach.
- There were multiple points of failure with planning and execution to create attendance plans for all students at severe attendance, and consideration should have been given to notifying the Ombudsman, outlining the mitigating circumstances arising due to COVID-19 and to seek an extension to the work until it was clear that a majority of families had returned to Halls Creek.

Terms of Reference 2

Consider the moderation of the standard of planning, including format, detail and parent engagement.

- In the absence of a documented, structured plan (both format and approach), the prospect of applying any kind of moderation process to assure consistency in the quality of SAPs was unattainable.
- A parent communication strategy that included explaining, well in advance, the purpose for preparing SAPs was neither considered nor developed.
- The acting Principals in Terms 2 and 3, 2020, were not advised of the regional office team's intention to arrive at the school and commence the SAP preparations, including family visits. This occurred only in the second week of the Term 2 school vacation.
- Recognising cultural sensitivities and voice was reinforced upon commencement of the SAP process as a critical but absent element of the SAP preparations. School-based Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) challenged the lack of family consultations.
- The Inquiry was advised that in some cases, the development of individual attendance plans without prior information, consultation and family visits triggered shame.

Terms of Reference 3

Consider the implementation and follow-up of each student attendance plan, including, but not limited to, engagement with in-school and/or external agency services and monitoring of student attendance rates.

- Follow-up was described as difficult given family movements and/or a reluctance for them to engage. Some initial notations of follow-up appeared in a spreadsheet (up to Term 4, Week 7, 2020); however, ongoing evidence of follow-up on student attendance could not be found.
- The 2020 SAPs have provided no point of ongoing reference. This makes them both impractical and unsustainable.
- Follow-up meetings that did occur with families appear to have had little impact on increasing family engagement with the school.
- The absence of a timely, community-wide communication strategy about the project to develop the SAPs created confusion and apprehension throughout the community regarding the rationale for the SAPs. This was exacerbated by the considerable level of COVID-19 anxiety across the community at the time.
- Based on the feedback to the Inquiry team from a number of school and community representatives, there are strong indications of a willingness for the community to come together to discuss their needs and share ideas about how the school can work 'with them' to address those needs.

Governance and management

Terms of Reference 4

Consider the chain of accountability and responsibility for the 'sign-off' for each plan.

- The Inquiry team found there was a breakdown in the communication and shared understanding on the work roles and responsibilities between the Kimberley Education Regional Office and the department's Statewide Services division.
- Discussions with the acting Principal and Statewide Services in March 2020, regarding the work required to complete the task, left those at Statewide Services frustrated and concerned about the lack of urgency and openness to collaborate and consult.
- The onset of COVID-19 at that time was described as having a major impact on the Halls Creek community, with many families leaving to go On Country.
- Parental sign-off on all plans was not achieved. Further, given that as few as 50% of families were understood to have returned to Halls Creek at the beginning of Term 3, 2020, it is difficult to reconcile the number of plans claimed to have been prepared.

Terms of Reference 5

Consider the level of experience, knowledge and skill required to prepare SAPs, and the level of experience, knowledge and skill held by those who prepared the plans in July 2020.

- A small team of regional office school-based staff conducted family visits.
- Concerns from Aboriginal staff members about the cultural inappropriateness of asking families to discuss their children's school attendance, along with other personal details, to give depth to the plans, was not given the consideration warranted.
- While AIEOs were engaged in the SAP process with no consultation and little understanding of the 'why', they were nonetheless committed to ensuring 'their families' were culturally respected throughout the process.
- In general, school-based staff are familiar with documented planning involving Individual Education Plans, but few were familiar with SAPs. On the balance of feedback gathered, the skills and experience of the team delegated to undertake the task of preparing and consulting with families regarding the attendance plans to the standard required was limited.
- The frequent reference to the importance of engaging with families using local language and/or Kriol as a means of demonstrating cultural respect was described as an opportunity lost.

Terms of Reference 6

Consider the criteria applied to determine the impact of the attendance planning that led to the public announcements of improvements in student attendance at Halls Creek District High School in August 2020, subsequently challenged.

- During the Inquiry, claims of attendance improvement appear to come down to the team leader's interpretation of 'what' a SAP is, what 'cut-off data' should be used to indicate attendance improvement, and how this was communicated to the regional office.
- Information used to indicate improved student attendance included data collected on 'individual students' rather than being based on 'whole-school data'.
- A draft report prepared for the regional office indicated student attendance improvements. However, there was a human error in transposition in which data from Semester 2, 2019 was incorrectly represented as being the data for Term 3, 2020.
- School staff and some regional office staff expressed doubt over the merit of the process, both in terms of its strategic and practical relevance to Halls Creek families.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1

The Inquiry found there was no indication of planning initiated by the regional office at the time it was confirmed in early 2020 that the Ombudsman's Recommendation must be implemented. This resulted in regional office staff lacking guidance, direction, and oversight, undertaking the work in a significantly compressed timeframe. Further, staff had no frame of reference through which to clarify areas of confusion or uncertainty.

Recommendation 1

For all projects of this scale and importance, the regional office and Statewide Services work together to provide necessary support for the successful completion of the project. This may include consideration of appointing an expert panel to co-design, with the regional office and school leaders, the scope and quality control methodologies to ensure the timely and successful completion of the project.

Finding 2

The absence of a documented plan to guide and monitor the implementation, progress and success of the project created a significant risk. The regional office's reluctance to engage with system supports such as Statewide Services compromised the likelihood of acceptable standards for attendance planning being met.

Recommendation 2

For all projects of this scale and/or priority, effective communication and collaboration between Statewide Services and regional offices is necessary. Together they should instigate discrete planning that incorporates robust adherence to the objectives and agreed parameters, and identifies assumptions and risks to ensure there is a point of reference against which to track and report on project progress.

Finding 3

Insufficient attention given to establishing checks and balances to ensure consistency of detail in the SAPs appears to have exacerbated school and community issues, and added further confusion regarding the processes necessary to ensure timely and effective follow-up for students and families. School community planning needs to be undertaken in the spirit of 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' Aboriginal families. This approach will enable effective two-way communication and in effect, a co-design approach.

Recommendation 3

Initiate an examination of all existing procedures and processes relating to student attendance and engagement for remote schools and those with high proportions of Aboriginal students. All engagements with families of this kind to apply a trauma-informed practice approach.

Finding 4

Whole-school strategic development and planning at Halls Creek District High School requires urgent attention to be completed to enable targeted attention to be given to school priorities, including student attendance. While steps are being taken to support the school's planning development, consideration should be given to providing targeted support and guidance to strengthen the school's leadership and planning processes.

Recommendation 4

To build a robust and sustainable Business Plan, provide support to the leadership team with a clear priority to achieve strategic, structural and systems clarity that meet contemporary governance standards for school planning.

Finding 5

Inadequate levels of strategic planning structures, operational processes, robust record keeping and the complete absence of a governance ethos for office management in 2020 rendered the regional office vulnerable to judgements of mismanagement.

Recommendation 5

Future initiatives of the scale and importance of this body of work to be managed through the disciplines reflected in a Project Management Planning methodology.

Finding 6

Inconsistency with attendance plan formats and system attendance planning nomenclature, led to vagueness and confusion between 'documented plans', 'individual student attendance plans' and the details required for either. With these matters not resolved before the project commenced, any prospect of standards moderation and quality control for sign-off of the plans was improbable.

As a result, the Inquiry found there were limited quality control measures applied to the standard of student information recorded; the level of detail provided relating to selected attendance strategies; inconsistency of staff and parental signatures; and lack of dating of the plans from one to the next.

Recommendation 6

For a project of this magnitude, urgent consideration be given to the department's attendance strategy team to develop a set of Online Training Modules for preparing effective student attendance plans. More intuitive templates to assist schools to customise attendance plans and approaches in line with the local school context would improve the consistency and impact at both the regional and system levels.

Finding 7

Reported improvements in student attendance were made using individual student attendance data. This, combined with a human error of transposition of the data, created the mistaken belief that there had been significant improvement in whole-school student attendance when in fact this was not the case.

Recommendation 7

Consider the training necessary for those preparing attendance plans, and related data analysis, to ensure there is a full understanding of what represents statistically verifiable improvement in school attendance rates.

Finding 8

The value of engaging with families in a culturally respectful manner can be significantly strengthened when local language is used. As Kriol is widely used across the local community, using it to engage with families has been described as a potential first step to respectfully connecting with those who are comfortable in speaking Kriol.

Recommendation 8

When meeting families, the school and regional office should engage the expertise of the AIEOs on the best way to deliver a culturally responsive communication and collaboration strategy.

Finding 9

Frequent comments were made about the importance for the whole community of Halls Creek to be involved for the sake of their children's future. This appears to have given rise to a belief that 'now' might be the time to take important steps towards achieving greater community unity on how to engage positively with the school.

Recommendation 9

Explore options to work with community leaders, parents, carers and allied agencies to strengthen school/community relations. Consider the value of community meetings at the school in combination with the school adopting a proactive strategy to focus on ways to improve visibility, presence and trust by involving the AIEOs, reaching out to community groups and employers and involving community Elders and members in respectful, culturally mindful engagement.