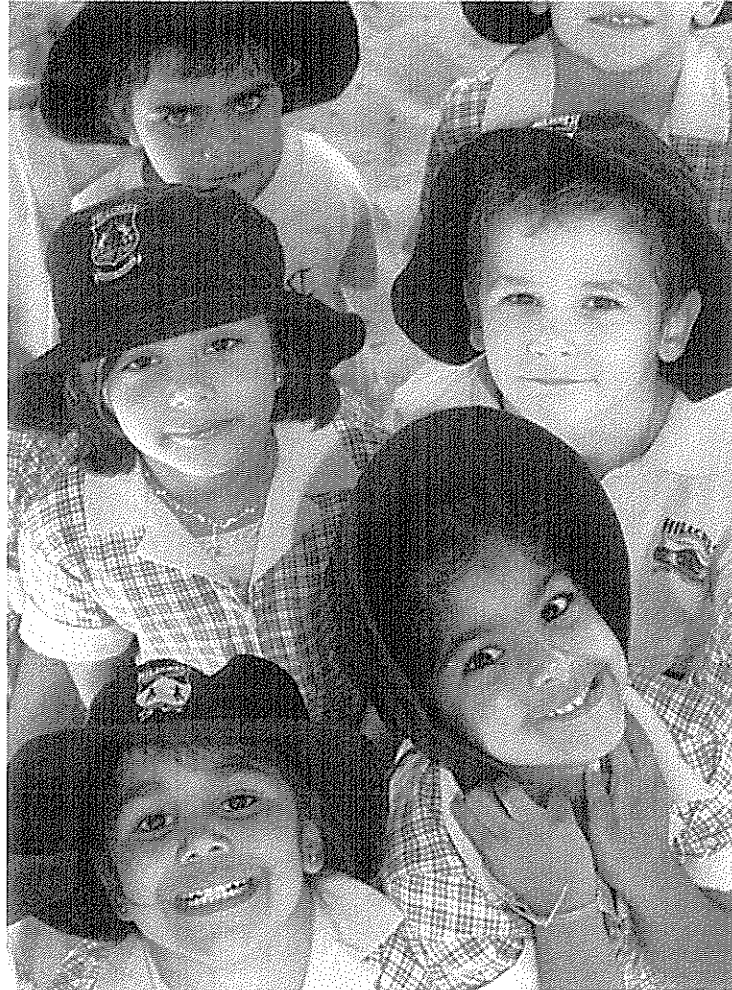


Better attendance: brighter futures

LOAN COPY



Mutual obligation to improve school attendance in Western Australian public schools



Department of
Education and Training



20 AUG 2009

This paper should not be removed from the Chamber

From the Minister

Regular attendance at school is critical to the success of all students.

While most students in Western Australia attend regularly, there is a significant and growing number who do not. This comes at a real cost to each student's education and seriously jeopardises their future. For many communities, there is also a significant cost in terms of anti-social behaviour and crime.

The situation is particularly dire for Aboriginal students, with only one third attending school more than 90% of the time.

As Minister for Education, I am not prepared to tolerate poor attendance and the impact it has on our young people. The *Better attendance: brighter futures* strategy aims to increase attendance of students in public schools by providing direct support to those students and areas in greatest need.

Poor attendance cannot be solved by schools alone. Not going to school can be symptomatic of other complex problems in children's lives; no single solution will work for all schools or all students. This new strategy is based on the mutual obligation of schools, parents and communities to develop strategies that link directly to the local causes of poor attendance.

At the same time the Department will demand stronger accountability for attendance at all levels. Data will be improved to give greater detail and more timely information to schools and communities about the nature and extent of their attendance problems. Targets will be set and rigorously monitored. More on the ground services and programs will be in place.

I am asking for public feedback on the proposals in this strategy.

It is time for schools, families and communities to work together to protect our children and young people from the tragic consequences of poor attendance. I seek your support to achieve this.

Hon Elizabeth Constable MLA
Minister Education

Introduction

The causes of poor attendance at school are diverse and demand diverse solutions. This strategy, *Better attendance: brighter futures*, promotes the mutual responsibility of schools, communities and parents to address poor student attendance.

A whole of community approach, including local government, businesses and other agencies, is more likely to improve attendance of individual students while achieving broader benefits for the community. Using evidence-based initiatives, this new strategy will support such approaches and provide resources that target the complex factors contributing to poor attendance.

Schools have a great influence on student attendance. They are responsible for building strong relationships, ensuring the curriculum is accessible for all students, and providing safe and welcoming learning environments. Schools must monitor each student's attendance and intervene early when attendance shows signs of being problematic. This strategy will support schools to identify poor attendance early, initiate effective responses, and review and report their effectiveness.

Differential resourcing will give schools, clusters of schools and districts the flexibility to apply local solutions to their specific contexts. Funding will be based on attendance data. Consideration will also be given to contributing influences of Socio Economic Index (SEI), location and cultural background. Key target groups are Aboriginal students, truants, students from kindergarten to Year 4, students going from Year 7 to Year 8, Year 10 students, and Year 11 and 12 students not engaged in any education, training or employment. Aligning with Classroom First, the strategy increases the flexibility of schools to tailor solutions to their context.

The *Better attendance: brighter futures* strategy will improve attendance by:

- 1 making sure all children are enrolled in school;
- 2 giving direct support to schools with the greatest need and building local community solutions;
- 3 ensuring strong support and action in the early years;
- 4 rewarding student attendance and parent participation;
- 5 taking swift action where a student's attendance is a problem;
- 6 holding parents accountable for their child's attendance at school;
- 7 setting up partnerships with the business community and local agencies to improve regular attendance;
- 8 training school and community members to address poor attendance; and
- 9 making regular attendance a priority of the Department.

What the data indicates

No consistent improvement has occurred in the attendance of Western Australian public school students over the past five years. Attendance data (2008) indicates that students attend on average 91% of the time; by comparison, the performance of other states ranges from 83% to 95%.

Approximately 70 000 Western Australian public school students attend school irregularly (that is, for less than 90% of the time) and, of these, 8 300 attend less than 60% of the time. Of these 70 000 students, 66% are in Perth, 25% in rural areas and 9% in remote areas.

Attendance decreases significantly when students enter Year 8 and by Year 10 only 53% attend regularly. The lowest rate of attendance in primary school is in Year 1.

Despite concerted efforts, there has been no improvement in Aboriginal student attendance over the last five years nor has there been a reduction in the 16% gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attendance rates. Two thirds of Aboriginal students attend less than 90% of the time.

Key performance indicators

Improving attendance is a major priority for the Department. There will be increased focus on each school's effectiveness in monitoring, intervening, reviewing and reporting in this area. Attendance will form an integral part of school performance management, standards reviews and external reviews.

The success of this strategy will be demonstrated through measurable improvement in student attendance in schools and for groups particularly at risk.

How to give feedback

All those with an interest in school attendance are invited to provide feedback on this strategy from 21 August to 21 November 2009 online at:

W: det.wa.edu.au/schoolsandyou

Strategies to improve attendance

1 All children are enrolled in school

There is currently no mechanism to detect children of compulsory school age who have never enrolled in an education program. A national analysis of non-enrolment and non-attendance data (DEEWR, 2009) found that, of the estimated 18 000 students between the ages of 6 and 14 not enrolled nationally, approximately 900 were from Western Australia. Only children who are enrolled in a school or education program can be tracked by the Department once they stop attending.

Actions

- All children not enrolled in an education program will be identified through data matching between the Department and Centrelink. This will build on earlier planning and trigger intervention.
- Parents will be made aware of the importance of enrolment and attendance through a Statewide communications strategy. This will include posters for schools and the community, information for parents, and advertising. An Aboriginal perspective will be built into the communications strategy.
- Students will be tracked across the borders of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory through the Tri-border Attendance Initiative. This will enable information to be shared and will engage agencies to support attendance and enrolment, particularly those of transient Aboriginal students.
- The student tracking system implemented in partnership with the Association of Independent Schools of WA and Catholic Education Office of WA will be improved to reduce the number of students whose whereabouts is unknown.
- Prosecution for non-enrolment will be streamlined to allow schools to take rapid action where parents have demonstrated no commitment to enrol a child in their care. Prosecution of parents under the *School Education Act 1999* for non-enrolment of their children carries a maximum monetary penalty of \$2 500.

2 Direct support to schools and communities with the greatest need

In responding to poor attendance, each school and community needs to tailor responses to its particular circumstances. To do this, resources will be provided directly to those schools with the most serious attendance issues.

Actions

- Each year metropolitan, country and remote schools with the most serious attendance problems will be identified and required to participate in an Attendance Improvement Measure (AIM). These schools will receive additional funding. In addition, communities or clusters of schools with the most severe attendance issues will be similarly identified. Each school or cluster will undertake a detailed evaluation of attendance and develop responses funded by the Department. Support includes profiling tools, strategic planning materials, training, funding and practical advice.
- Schools and communities will be identified using the annual attendance audit data including attendance rate, percentage of students in each at-risk category and percentage of unauthorised absences. Aboriginality will be central to the identification process.

The Attendance Improvement Measure (AIM) will have five elements:

1. **Notifying:** Districts, schools and clusters of schools will be notified that they have been identified on the basis of poor attendance. This will require the establishment of an AIM committee of local stakeholders to oversee the development and implementation of an improvement plan.
2. **Profiling:** A detailed profile of attendance in a school, cluster of schools or community will be developed and presented to the AIM committee.
3. **Planning:** Staff will be trained to work with schools and communities to develop attendance improvement plans. They will be provided with cultural competency training. Plans may include appointing attendance personnel, public information strategies, joint agency truancy sweeps, community compacts and incentive programs.
4. **Resourcing:** Funding will be available to support the plan of each school or local area.
5. **Reviewing:** Each school and community will be required to evaluate and report on the outcomes of the attendance plan. This report will be available to the local community.

3 Strong support and action in the early years

Regular attendance patterns established at a young age are more likely to result in regular attendance and prevent students from experiencing gaps in their learning. Schools will take significant action in the early years to establish such patterns.

Actions

- All families will receive an attendance support kit when they enrol in Kindergarten, Pre-primary and Year 1. These kits will promote the importance of attendance and give parents simple strategies to support regular attendance.
- Culturally appropriate kits emphasising the importance of regular attendance will be developed.
- Schools will be notified immediately, via electronic means, when non-attendance in the early years is beginning to reach serious levels.
- It will be mandatory for all kindergartens to participate in the annual student attendance audit. This ensures attendance of all students is included in the audit.
- Aboriginal children will be able to attend their local kindergarten and pre-primary school.

4 Rewarding student attendance and parent participation

Attendance improves when parents and schools work together. Programs that reward staff and students, and encourage parent support will have a direct impact on student attendance. Schools will be encouraged to implement reward and incentive programs to improve student attendance.

Actions

- The Department will work with the schools implementing the Passports incentive program to assess and broaden its application.
- A framework will be developed to support schools entering into agreements with local businesses to co-fund reward and incentive programs which benefit both the school and the community.
- Attendance Improvement Measure (AIM) schools implementing breakfast and lunch programs will be supported through agencies such as Foodbank and will receive financial support for these programs.
- AIM schools will receive reward payments for meeting agreed attendance targets.
- Excellence will be acknowledged through an awards program to a number of schools that demonstrate significant improvement in student attendance rates.
- Successful practice will be showcased at specially convened attendance improvement forums.
- Recognition grants will be provided on a trial basis to a small number of principals and teachers who bring about sustained improvement by meeting targets in attendance in identified schools with significant risk.

5 Swift action where a student's attendance is a serious problem

Early detection of emerging attendance issues is critical to successful intervention. This prevents poor attendance from developing into patterns of sustained non-attendance.

Actions

- All schools and districts will be notified immediately through the School Information System (SIS) of non-attendance patterns that are reaching critical levels.

This will occur in three ways:

- Establish an attendance alert process: The SIS Lesson Attendance module will generate an electronic alert that draws attention of school administrative staff when specified thresholds of attendance are exceeded.
- Expand the SMS communication tool: This will be expanded to additional schools likely to benefit from the instantaneous notification to parents of unauthorised absences.
- Introduce Watchlists: This will issue delegated representatives in the school with either an SMS alert or email when a student reaches a pre-determined number of half day absences. It will give an immediate indication to staff that an individual student is at risk and requires support.

6 Holding parents accountable for their child's attendance

Under the *School Education Act 1999* (the Act) parents have primary responsibility for ensuring their child goes to school. The Act has sanctions, such as fines and prosecution, for non-attendance without a valid reason or failing to enrol a child in an approved education program. Schools and districts will be given greater authority to direct parents to specific services and take decisive action to prosecute cases of persistent non-attendance and non-enrolment. These sanctions will be balanced by support for parents.

Actions

- Under the *Parental Support and Responsibility Act 2008* (PSR Act), authorised district officers will negotiate Responsible Parenting Agreements that direct parents to the support they need. For the parents of children about whom there are significant attendance concerns, attendance panels will have authority to recommend that the Director General applies for a Responsible Parenting Order (RPO). Through the RPO, parents with ongoing difficulties will be connected to the support they need to improve their children's behaviour and attendance. Agencies will also have greater authority to share relevant information under the RPO.
- The process of prosecuting parents who fail to support their children's attendance at school will be simplified and include fast-tracking prosecutions where there is a history of parent non-responsiveness. Consultation will occur with staff of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to learn from their experiences in fast-tracking prosecutions.
- Procedures for attendance panels will be streamlined so schools can use this process to deal with chronic cases of non-attendance.
- A paralegal officer will be appointed to support changes in how the Department responds to chronic cases of poor attendance. This will include support of more straightforward prosecutorial processes and creation of operational links between the *Parental Support and Responsibility Legislation 2008* and attendance panels.
- The Department will support parents by expanding the Positive Parenting Program to 120 metropolitan and 60 regional centres over the next four years. The program supports parents to create harmonious home environments conducive to school attendance.

7 Mobilise the business community and local agencies

The involvement of businesses and local agencies in targeting poor attendance will benefit the whole community by reducing juvenile crime and increasing students' potential to make valuable contributions to society. Compacts between schools, local businesses and agencies will allow an effective approach to attendance to be developed based on mutual obligation for the care of young people.

Actions

- Community compacts will be established to formalise integrated action at the local level. These compacts will include industry, business and agencies.
- Following a successful trial in 2008, the Department will enter into a partnership with WA Police to conduct anti-truancy operations such as Street Sweeps. Processes will be established that enable police to verify immediately any potentially at risk student's enrolment status and work with relevant Department staff.
- The Department will partner with local government and the WA Police to expand programs such as Keeping Kids in Schools which involve agreements with retailers to refuse service to students during school hours.
- The Department will improve the standardised leave pass system to strengthen links with police and parents.
- A community attendance profiling process will be developed through a trial in Newman in 2009. This trial will deliver an attendance auditing and planning process for communities where attendance issues are beyond the influence of the school alone. The profile enables a range of stakeholders to work together to resolve local attendance issues in a structured and measurable way.

8 Training staff and community representatives

Addressing poor attendance is a complex task that demands specific knowledge and expertise. Implementing effective strategies will also require people who can facilitate solutions involving a range of stakeholders. Training district and school staff to manage and plan effectively with families and the community will have a direct impact on improved student attendance.

Actions

- Training in practical responses to attendance will be developed and offered to schools and districts. Training will be mandatory for schools identified as being most at risk.
- Two attendance forums will be conducted each year providing a platform for communication of attendance issues and an opportunity to share innovative programs and best practice.
- The student attendance audit is conducted twice a year (one voluntary audit and one mandatory audit) and provides detailed comparative data to schools, districts and the system. This process will be further improved to allow schools, clusters of schools and districts greater access to attendance information that supports effective planning and appropriate allocation of resources.
- The *Improving attendance* resource currently used by schools will be revised to include advice on practical attendance strategies and promote parent engagement and community partnerships. The resource will be issued to all public schools and made available online to private schools. It will contain specific strategies linked to the various causes of poor attendance.
- A range of schools will be expected to undertake a process that will lead to formal school, community partnership agreements. Attendance will be expected to be an issue that would be highlighted.

9 Regular attendance a priority

Addressing student attendance demands an extended period of direct intervention by the Department, districts, schools, principals and staff. Student attendance will be a key priority of the Department from 2010 to 2013. This will mean a renewed focus by schools and districts on establishing and meeting well defined targets and embedding achievement within performance management and accountability processes.

Actions

- Attendance will form an integral part of the Department's *Focus 2010* document and be accompanied by a Director General's statement on attendance.
- All schools will set attendance improvement targets to be monitored by Directors Schools who assess how schools are dealing with attendance issues through the standards review process.
- Directors Schools will include attendance in the performance agreements of principals of schools with significant attendance problems.
- Data systems will be created for schools that link attendance with other indicators of education risk such as literacy and behaviour.
- Research will be commissioned to establish the current causes of non-attendance and the most effective evidence-based responses.
- All Aboriginal students with an attendance rate below 80% will require a documented plan.
- Schools will be further supported through increased links between attendance and other school support programs. Factors that impact on attendance include mental health, classroom management and pastoral care provided by the school. The following school support programs will align directly to the new attendance strategy:
 - Expansion of the School Psychology Service: Fifty additional school psychologists will be employed in schools over the next four years to support students with mental, behavioural and other health issues which have a direct impact on student attendance.
 - Expansion of the Chaplaincy Program: This program will be expanded across the State over the next four years. Chaplains play a key pastoral role in supporting schools to develop welcoming and positive learning environments. Students are more likely to attend school when they feel safe and supported.
 - Expansion of the Classroom Management Strategies (CMS) Program: Effective teachers with sound classroom practice create environments where students succeed and choose to attend. CMS trains teachers in classroom and instructional skills so disruption is reduced and engagement increased.
 - Targeted access to Dare to Lead's peer support process: This will enable principals to participate in a collegial analysis of school performance in relation to cultural safety, including academic outcomes, attendance, engagement with Aboriginal culture and community involvement.
 - Work of participation coordinators: These will be aligned to work in an increasingly collaborative capacity with attendance and Aboriginal education teams to support attendance of 15 to 17 year old students.