RESPONSE TO FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The table below outlines the Department of Education's position on each of the report's findings and recommendations.

Finding	Recommendation	Activities	Commentary
1. The Auditor General's 2015 performance audit report Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools called on the Department of Education to address five recommendations. Three of these recommendations require further action regarding evaluation, reporting and identifying schools for support.			Finding is agreed. Noted and addressed in the following.
2. The Department of Education did not provide schools, Statewide Services, regions or central services with direction on student attendance in either of its annual strategic guidelines documents, *Focus 2018* and *Focus 2019*.	**Recommendation 1** The Department of Education use future *Focus* publications to provide schools, Statewide Services, regional offices and/or central services with direction on student attendance.		Finding is agreed. Recommendation is supported. A review has commenced of the *Student Attendance in Public Schools Policy*. Future directions in relation to student attendance will be informed by consultation undertaken throughout this review. This consultation will include input from across Government, the community and the public school system.

Finding	Recommendation	Activities	Commentary
3. The fifth recommendation in the 2015 performance audit report called on the Department of Education to assist schools to build and maintain local partnerships to address student attendance. The Department has since provided schools with more resources and tools to support their work with parents via the online Student Attendance Toolkit. In addition, Responsible Parenting Agreements are now more accessible for schools to use to address persistent student absence.	**Recommendation 2** The Department of Education promote and support the use of more pilot programs that encourage greater input from parents and communities in addressing student non-attendance.	Formal evaluations are planned for the Full Service School pilot and the recently announced Alternative Learning Settings pilot. Evaluation of these and other pilots/emergent programs will include assessment of impact on learning, engagement and attendance.	Finding is agreed. Recommendation is supported. Existing pilots such as the Kimberley Juvenile Justice Strategy, Target 120 and the Full Service School trial involve cross-agency approaches and seek input from parents and/or the community to support stronger engagement with learning and better attendance at school. Evaluation of these pilot programs, and potentially of other efforts designed to improve student engagement, such as the Big Picture Education model, provide opportunity to consider new approaches and new metrics to support improved school attendance.
4. The third recommendation in the 2015 performance audit report called on the Department of Education to review its guidance to schools on the use of student absence codes. The Department reported that it has performed this review and provided schools with guidance via the Student Attendance Toolkit.			Finding is agreed. Due to staff movement and attrition, support for schools regarding attendance codes is an ongoing need.

Finding	Recommendation	Activities	Commentary
5. The Department of Education has not addressed the Auditor General's recommendation to 'regularly evaluate' the effectiveness of attendance initiatives. The Department has evaluated some programs since the 2015 audit report, such as attendance advisory panels and badged attendance officers. However, the Department has no plans to evaluate other major attendance initiatives, such as Responsible Parenting Agreements.	**Recommendation 3** The Department of Education evaluate all major student attendance initiatives, including Responsible Parenting Agreements, and revise guidance to schools accordingly. This includes updating all policy, procedures, and guidelines provided to schools via the Student Attendance website.	In 2017, the Department commissioned an independent evaluation of two attendance initiatives: Badged Attendance Officers and Attendance Panels. A plan to gather and analyse system-wide data on the impact of Responsible Parenting Agreements is being developed. The *Student Attendance in Public Schools Policy* is currently under review and is being informed by these evaluations.	Finding is agreed. Recommendation is supported. The Department will continue to evaluate student attendance strategies and initiatives. Formal evaluation findings will inform policy development and identification of any gaps in support to schools.
6. The Department of Education used a voluntary school survey to evaluate the Student Attendance Toolkit. Due to weaknesses in the survey method, the evaluation did not determine the reach and usefulness of the resource across all schools with student attendance issues.	**Recommendation 4** The Department of Education revise its methods for evaluating the Student Attendance Toolkit to ensure that, at a minimum, it collects information on the reach and usefulness of the resource across all schools with attendance issues. To achieve this, it should be compulsory for schools to complete the Student Attendance Toolkit evaluation survey.	The Department commits to targeted evaluation of individual strategies and initiatives within the Student Attendance Toolkit. The Department will identify those schools with larger than expected numbers of indicated at-risk and moderately at-risk students* and will support those schools to develop attendance improvement plans that include strategies from the toolkit and meaningful improvement targets. Through this work, the effectiveness of particular strategies in the toolkit will be evaluated and opportunities identified for improvements to the toolkit.	Finding is agreed. Recommendation is partially supported. Methods for evaluating the toolkit should be revised to improve rigour and validity, but use of a compulsory survey is not supported. A mandated survey increases the administrative burden on schools and is counter to the Department's commitment to reduce, where appropriate, reporting requirements from schools.

Finding	Recommendation	Activities	Commentary
7. The Department of Education could not quantify its expenditure on student attendance initiatives since the implementation of the Better Attendance: Brighter Futures strategy between 2010 and 2012.			Finding is agreed. The Department will ensure that any future attendance strategies that include a dedicated budget will include an explicit process for acquitting expenditure.
8. The Department of Education does not proactively identify schools that need support to address student attendance. Instead, schools are responsible for monitoring their own performance and accessing training and assistance as required.	**Recommendation 5** The Department of Education take proactive steps to identify schools in need of support to address student attendance.	As identified in the response to Recommendation 4, the Department will identify a range of schools with larger than expected numbers of indicated at-risk and moderately at-risk students, and will support those schools to develop attendance improvement plans that include strategies from the Student Attendance Toolkit and meaningful improvement targets. The Department will continue to work with other State Government agencies, including the Department of Communities, the Western Australia Police Force, the Department of Health and the Department of Justice, to build a whole-of-Government approach to removing the complex barriers to attendance for such students. This collaboration will be especially focused through trials and pilots such as Target 120, Full Service Schools, Alternative Learning Settings and the Kimberley Juvenile Justice Strategy.	Finding is agreed. Recommendation is supported. Schools with attendance that is below or well below expected are clearly flagged in the School Performance Monitoring (SPM) system. This information is available to every school and to those who review them. There is opportunity to make better use of student attendance data to more effectively target support. The Department will consider the most effective way to achieve this.

Finding	Recommendation	Activities	Commentary
9. The Department of Education has only partially addressed the fourth recommendation from the 2015 performance audit report, which called for more transparent reporting of student attendance. Since the 2015-16 annual report, the Department has reported the percentage of students in each category of educational risk due to non-attendance. However, it does not report the number of students in each category. Arguably, this obscures the scale of educational risk due to non-attendance.			Finding is agreed. The Department will consider publicly reporting the number of students in attendance risk categories. The more extensive reporting of attendance data through other means, such as the Department's website, is being investigated.
10. The Department of Education has not addressed the first part of the Auditor General's fourth recommendation to set and report on targets for attendance at the school level. Some schools set their own targets and report progress in their annual School Report. The Department provides guidance to assist target setting but does not require schools to set attendance targets.		Accountability for school performance, including student attendance, is the responsibility of each school principal. Schools are required to undertake a robust process of self-assessment. From this self-assessment, schools are required to undertake school improvement planning, which includes setting performance targets. It is the Department's view that school planning priorities and targets are the responsibility of each school. Every public school is subject to a cyclic external review, to ensure that the school's self-assessment, planning and monitoring processes are robust and effective.	Finding is accurate in that schools are not required to set attendance targets. However, school accountability for attendance is strongly embedded through existing system practices. The SPM system monitors the attendance of every public school. This includes the attendance rate and the rate of regular attendance, taking into account social disadvantage. Schools with attendance that is below or well below expected rates, are clearly flagged. This information is available to every school and to those who review schools.

Finding	Recommendation	Activities	Commentary
		As stated in relation to Finding 6 and Recommendation 4, the Department will identify a range of schools with larger than expected numbers of indicated at-risk and moderately at-risk students, and will support those schools to develop attendance improvement plans that include strategies from the Student Attendance Toolkit, supported with meaningful improvement targets. This work will inform the circumstances in which improvement targets can positively affect student attendance. This will in turn inform attendance policy requirements and system supports.	Many schools have excellent student attendance records, attaining high percentages of students attending regularly. In these schools, attendance targets would not be required or expected. Schools that have attendance issues and have not made adequate plans to improve attendance, which may include attendance targets, will be identified as part of the public school review process. The last occasion on which the Department mandated attendance targets for schools was in 2010. The table below shows no improvement from the 2010 attendance rate in any of the subsequent three years.

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013
Attendance rate (%)	91.1	90.9	90.8	91.0

If improvement targets are to be used as an accountability tool, they will only be meaningful where schools have a reasonable locus of control and responsibility in respect to whether or not they can be achieved. In relation to attendance, this means targets are of very limited value if attendance is already very strong (i.e. there is no realistic opportunity to improve), or if it is extremely low (where the causes of non-attendance are typically beyond the reasonable control or influence of the school).

Finding	Recommendation	Activities	Commentary
11. The Department of Education has not addressed the third part of the Auditor General's fourth recommendation to report the number of schools meeting target levels of attendance.			Refer comments provided for Finding 10.
12. The Department of Education does not break down information about student attendance across metropolitan and regional areas in its annual report, despite considerable variation in attendance rates.	**Recommendation 6** The Department of Education improve reporting of student attendance by including in its annual report: a. The number of students in each category of student attendance, in addition to the percentage. b. The percentage and number of students in each category of student attendance by region (and by local government area in non-metropolitan regions). c. The number of schools meeting their attendance targets by region (and by local government area in non-metropolitan regions).	a. The Department will include in its Annual Report the number of students in attendance risk categories in addition to the percentages. b. The Department will include in its Annual Report the percentage and number of students in each category of student attendance by region.	The Finding is agreed. Parts a and b of the recommendation are supported. Part c of the recommendation is not supported. The Department is also exploring ways to publish data in an appropriate form other than the Annual Report. More extensive reporting of attendance data through the Department's website is being investigated. The Department does not support part c of the recommendation. This replicates a past initiative that did not achieve desired outcomes. See commentary on Finding 10 for further information on the Department's approach.

* The Student Attendance categories are:

- Regular Attendance: 90 – 100%;
- Indicated Risk: 80 – <90%;
- Moderate Risk: 60 – <80%; and
- Severe Risk: 0 – <60%