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Better attendance: *Brighter futures*



Department of
Education



From the Minister

Regular attendance at schools is fundamental to student learning.

On average public school students in Western Australia attend school 91 per cent of the time. This means that, while the majority of children attend school regularly, it is also the case that many students attend school less than 90 per cent of the time. While the majority of children who miss school do so for legitimate reasons, such as illness, it is also concerning that 36 per cent of absences are unexplained.

Irregular attendance comes at a real cost to each student's education and seriously jeopardises their future opportunities. For some communities, there is also a significant cost in terms of anti-social behaviour.

Parents who make regular attendance a priority are also helping their children to value learning and to accept responsibility. These are important lessons for life.

Attendance patterns and attitudes to school and learning are formed early. Children who develop good attendance habits in the early years are more likely to maintain them throughout their school years. This is vitally important because students who do not attend regularly miss out on carefully planned sequences of instruction and on active learning experiences and class participation.

As students learn to read and acquire basic numeracy skills, it is important they attend school regularly so they can practise these skills each day.

In many severe cases, poor attendance cannot be solved by schools alone. Not going to school is often symptomatic of other complex problems in children's lives; no single solution will work for all schools or all students.

Better attendance: Brighter futures aims to improve attendance of students in public schools by providing direct support to those students in greatest need.

This new approach is based on the mutual obligation of schools, parents and communities to develop strategies that link directly to the local causes of poor attendance.

The Department of Education will improve the quality of data so that schools and communities have greater detail and more timely information about the nature and extent of their attendance issues. Attendance targets will be set and rigorously monitored. Stronger accountability for attendance will be required at all levels.

Schools, families and communities must work together to protect our children and young people from the tragic consequences of poor school attendance.

Dr Elizabeth Constable MLA

Minister for Education

From the Director General

Better attendance: Brighter futures reflects my commitment in Classroom First to ensure every student in every public school is successful. By attending school each day students have a much greater likelihood of actively engaging in the curriculum and developing the knowledge and skills they need for future personal and career success.

The majority of students in our schools attend school regularly which is highly commendable. However it is unacceptable that nearly 30 per cent of students miss at least half a day of school each week.

Unfortunately, once students develop a pattern of non attendance, staying away from school can often seem easier than attending.

Some of the many reasons why students don't attend school include:

- illness and health issues
- negative school experiences as a result of learning difficulties
- family issues or lack of parental support
- social and emotional difficulties with peers including bullying and harassment.

Of particular concern are the many Aboriginal students who struggle to attend school regularly. In 2009 attendance of Aboriginal students was nearly 16 per cent lower than non-Aboriginal students. This gap must and will be reduced. Greater collaboration across the Department and external agencies is an integral part of *Better attendance: Brighter futures* to help schools and communities improve attendance, engagement and success of all Aboriginal students in our schools.

Student attendance must not be considered in isolation. Schools and teachers play an important role in encouraging attendance by creating welcoming and inclusive learning environments that engage students. School psychologists and student services staff also play important roles in assisting teachers to develop appropriate strategies and by working with individual students to improve attendance.

As we implement *Better attendance: Brighter futures* I am confident we will achieve the improvements we need to ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed.

Sharyn O'Neill
Director General

Introduction

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

A whole community approach, including local government, businesses and other agencies, is more likely to improve the attendance of individual students while achieving broader benefits for the community. Evidence-based initiatives will support these approaches and resources will be provided that target the complex factors contributing to poor attendance.

Schools have a great impact on student attendance. They are responsible for:

- promoting to parents the importance of their children not missing school
- building strong relationships
- ensuring the curriculum is accessible for all students
- providing safe and welcoming learning environments.

Schools must monitor each student's attendance and intervene early when non-attendance shows signs of being problematic. Support will be provided to schools to identify poor attendance early, initiate responses, and review and report on their effectiveness.

Differential resourcing will give schools or clusters of schools 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 moving from Year 7 to Year 8
- Year 10 students
- Year 11 and 12 students not engaged in education, training or employment.

Aligning with Classroom First, *Better attendance: Brighter futures* increases the flexibility of schools to tailor solutions to their local context.

Better attendance: Brighter futures includes the following key strategies to improve student attendance in public schools:

- 1 ensuring all children are enrolled in school
- 2 giving direct support to schools and communities with the greatest need
- 3 ensuring strong support and action in the early years and at transition points
- 4 recognising initiatives that encourage student attendance and parent participation
- 5 notifying schools early where non-attendance is a serious issue
- 6 supporting parents to take responsibility for their child's attendance at school
- 7 establishing partnerships with local businesses and agencies to improve attendance
- 8 providing professional learning for school staff and community members on how to address poor attendance
- 9 making regular attendance a priority across 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 (2009) indicates that students attend on average 91 per cent of the time; by comparison, the performance of other states ranges from 83 per cent to 95 per cent.

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

Attendance decreases significantly when students enter Year 8. By Year 10 only 53 per cent of students 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 15.9 per cent gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student attendance rates. Two thirds of Aboriginal students attend less than 90 per cent of the time.

Key performance indicators

Improving attendance is a major priority for the Department, with 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 and reviews.

The success of this strategy will be demonstrated through:

- measurable improvement in student attendance in schools and for key at risk groups
- improvement in the attitudes of parents of children who do not attend school regularly
- effectiveness of local community/business partnerships in addressing non-attendance.



Strategies to improve attendance

1. Ensuring 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 six and 14 years 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 who are not enrolled in an education program will be identified through data matching between the Department and other relevant agencies including Centrelink, Medicare, Office of the Attorney General and/or Department of Health.
- Parents will be made aware of the importance of enrolment and attendance through a Statewide communications strategy. This will include a range of materials for schools, parents and communities. An Aboriginal perspective will be built into the communications strategy and there will be scope for communities to tailor communications to local needs.
- 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 are unknown.
- Prosecution of parents for non-enrolment of their children under the *School Education Act 1999* will be streamlined to allow the Department to take rapid action where parents have been provided with support but have refused to enrol a child in their care in school.

Supporting program

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.

2. Giving direct support to schools and communities with the greatest need

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

Actions

- Each year schools and communities or clusters of schools with the most serious non-attendance problems will be identified using the annual attendance audit data including attendance rate and percentage of students in each at risk category disaggregated by Aboriginality. They will be supported to establish a committee to participate in an Attendance Improvement Measure (AIM) to profile student attendance, and plan and implement improvement strategies for the whole school. Support will include profiling tools, strategic planning materials, training, funding and practical advice.
- The Attendance Improvement Measure (AIM) will have five elements:
 1. **Notifying:** Schools/clusters will be notified that they have been identified as AIM schools and encouraged to establish an AIM committees of local stakeholders to oversee the development and implementation of an improvement plans. The AIM committees may include representatives from the school councils and the Parents and Citizens' (P&C) association.
 2. **Profiling:** Schools or clusters will develop a detailed profile of student attendance in their community including research into the reasons for non-attendance. This will be presented to the AIM committees.
 3. **Planning:** School staff will be supported to develop culturally appropriate attendance improvement plans. Where necessary, cultural competency training will be delivered by Aboriginal education teams. Schools will work with AIM committees to develop responses and attendance planning will be incorporated into school improvement plans and reconciliation action plans. The process is designed to improve student engagement and may include appointment of school based attendance officers, public information strategies, joint agency truancy sweeps, community agreements and incentive programs. Each attendance plan will be specific to local context and need.
 4. **Resourcing:** Funding will be distributed directly to identified schools or clusters to support the development and implementation of attendance plans.
 5. **Reviewing:** Each school and community will be required to evaluate and develop a written report on the outcomes of their attendance plan. This report will be available to the local community.

3. Ensuring strong support and action in the early years and at transition points

Regular attendance patterns established at a young age are more likely to result in regular attendance throughout the school years 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 information to support attendance when they enrol in Kindergarten, Pre-primary and Year 1, or when enrolling in a new school. This information will promote the importance of attendance, give parents simple strategies to support regular attendance and outline their obligations in relation to attendance.
- Schools will work with P&C Associations, school councils and school/community partnership groups to develop culturally appropriate and relevant information customised to meet the individual school context.
- Families will be provided with information to support attendance at transition points and for newly enrolled students.

Supporting program

Universal Access under the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education provides all children with access to enrol and attend their local Kindergarten and Pre-primary school from 2013. Expanded Kindergarten from 11 to 15 hours a week will also be rolled out over the next three years. Children from Aboriginal, disadvantaged and/or culturally and linguistically diverse families will be supported and encouraged to enrol their children.

4. Recognising initiatives that encourage student attendance and parent participation

Attendance improves when parents and schools work together. Initiatives that recognise local communities and schools working together and that encourage parent support will have a direct impact on student attendance. Schools will be supported to implement recognition programs to improve student attendance.

Actions

- The Department will work with schools implementing attendance incentive programs such as *Passports* to monitor and assess their effectiveness and broaden the application of successful programs. The Department will support schools to implement programs which encourage and recognise parent participation and involvement in school communities.
- Attendance Improvement Measure (AIM) schools implementing breakfast and lunch programs will be supported through agencies such as Foodbank.
- Significant achievement or improvement in attendance will be acknowledged.
- Successful school attendance practice will be recognised, showcased and promoted to other schools, parents and the broader community to acknowledge the achievements of schools. This may include acknowledging best practice across a range of areas such as improved attendance rates of Aboriginal students and significant improvement and engagement of students identified as severely at risk.



5. Notifying schools early where non-attendance is a serious issue

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

Actions

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

This will occur in two ways:

- o Establishing a non-attendance alert process: The SIS lesson attendance module add-on – Watchlists – will issue stakeholders with an email alert, when a pre-determined number of half day absences has been reached. This will give an immediate indication to staff that an individual student or a cohort is at risk and may require support.
- o Expanding the SMS communication tool: This will be expanded to more schools likely to benefit from the instantaneous notification to parents of unauthorised absences.
- The student attendance audit, which is conducted twice a year (one voluntary audit and one mandatory audit) and provides detailed comparative data to schools, clusters and system-wide, will be further improved to give schools and clusters greater access to attendance information that supports effective planning and appropriate allocation of resources.

6. Supporting parents to take responsibility for their child's attendance at school

Under the *School Education Act 1999* parents have primary responsibility for ensuring their child goes to school. Regular attendance is essential for children to gain maximum benefit from their schooling. The Act provides for the prosecution of the parent where they fail to enrol their child in an approved education program or where the child is persistently absent without a valid reason. Where all supportive strategies have been tried, the Department will use its authority to more formally engage parents with the support and services they need to improve the situation and take decisive action to prosecute parents if it is warranted.

Actions

- The Department will implement the *Parental Support and Responsibility Act 2008* by instigating responsible parenting agreements and requesting responsible parenting orders where appropriate. Guidelines for schools on agreements and orders will be developed
- The process of prosecuting parents who fail to support their children's attendance at school will be simplified. It will include fast-tracking prosecutions where there is a history of parent non-responsiveness.

Supporting program

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 develop the skills to manage their children in a positive way and establish routines that are conducive to regular school attendance.



7. Establishing partnerships with local businesses and agencies to improve attendance

The involvement of local businesses and agencies in targeting poor attendance will benefit the whole community by reducing juvenile crime and increasing each student's potential to make a valuable contribution to society. Agreements between schools, local businesses and agencies will allow effective approaches to attendance to be developed based on mutual obligation for the care of young people.

Actions

- Community agreements will be established to formalise integrated action at the local level. These agreements will include partnerships between schools and industry, business, agencies and local government. A framework will be developed to support schools entering into agreements.
- The Department will promote local partnerships with WA Police to conduct anti-truancy operations such as Street Sweeps and expand programs such as Keeping Kids in Schools. Processes will be established that enable verification of any potentially at risk students' enrolment status.
- The Department will improve the standardised leave pass system to strengthen links with WA Police and parents.

8. Providing professional learning for school staff and community members on how to address poor attendance

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

Actions

- Professional learning in culturally appropriate, practical responses to attendance will be developed and offered to schools and clusters. Training will be mandatory for staff in those schools identified as most at risk.
- The *Improving attendance* resource currently used by schools will be revised to include practical attendance strategies and information on how to re-engage students with poor attendance, encourage parental engagement and ways to develop community partnerships. The resource will be distributed to all public schools and made available online to private schools. It will contain specific strategies linked to the various causes of poor attendance.



9. Making regular attendance a priority across the Department

Addressing student non-attendance requires an extended period of direct intervention by staff at all levels. This means a renewed focus by schools on establishing and meeting well defined targets and embedding this within all planning, performance management and accountability processes.

Actions

- Attendance forms an integral part of the Department's documentation.
- All schools will set attendance improvement targets which will be monitored through accountability processes.
- Principals of schools with significant attendance problems will have improved student attendance included in their performance agreements.
- Data systems will be created for schools that link attendance with other indicators of education risk such as literacy and behaviour.
- Research will be conducted to establish the current causes of non-attendance and the most effective evidence-based responses.
- Current programs and services that support schools to improve attendance a focus and provide better links to support schools to improve attendance.

Supporting programs

- The expansion of the following school support programs will provide additional capacity to support attendance:
 - **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.
 - **Chaplaincy program:** This program will be expanded across the State over the next four years. Chaplains play a key pastoral care role in supporting schools to develop welcoming and positive learning environments. Students are more likely to attend school when they feel safe and supported.
 - **Classroom Management Strategies (CMS) professional learning 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.
 - **Participation coordinators:** They will work more collaboratively with attendance and Aboriginal education teams to support attendance of 15 to 17 year old students.

Aboriginal education

- All Aboriginal students with an attendance rate below 80 per cent require a documented plan in 2010, and Aboriginal students with an attendance rate below 90 per cent will require a documented plan from 2012.

