Student attendance

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OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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GPO Box 12
Sydney NSW 2001

The Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Sydney NSW 2000

The Legislative Council
Parliament House
Sydney NSW 2000

In accordance with section 38E of the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983,* I present a report titled **'Student attendance'.**

Margaret Crawford
Auditor-General for New South Wales
27 September 2022

audit.nsw.gov.au

The Audit Office of New South Wales pay our respect and recognise Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of the land in NSW.

We recognise that Aboriginal people, as custodians, have a spiritual, social and cultural connection with their lands and waters, and have made and continue to make a rich, unique and lasting contribution to the State. We are committed to continue learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' history and culture.

We honour and thank the traditional owners of the land on which our office is located, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and the traditional owners of the lands on which our staff live and work. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and to the next generation of leaders.

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Section one

Student attendance

Executive summary

Regular attendance at school is important for academic and other long-term outcomes. Students who do not attend regularly are less likely to complete school and more likely to experience poorer long-term health and social outcomes. A range of factors influence student attendance including student engagement and wellbeing, family and community factors and the school environment.

The NSW Department of Education's (the department's) Strategic Plan for 2018–2022 identifies improving student attendance as a priority. It has identified 95% as its expected level of attendance. It set targets to increase the proportion of students attending school at least 90% of the time, from 79.4% to 82% in primary schools and 64.5% to 70% for secondary schools.

This report focuses on attendance data for Semester 1 of 2018, 2019 and 2021. Unless otherwise noted, attendance data refers to Years 1–10 in alignment with national reporting conventions. Changes in recording systems and definitions mean attendance data prior to 2018 is not comparable. Attendance data for Semester 1 of 2020 and 2022 was significantly affected by COVID-related disruptions, which prevented many students across the State from attending school. Data for Semester 1 of 2021 is considered relatively less affected by COVID-related disruptions.

The *Education Act 1990* (the Act) sets out the responsibilities of students, parents and the department for ensuring students receive compulsory schooling. The department has developed policies, procedures and guidance to assist schools in managing their responsibilities to promote regular attendance. In this report, we define 'regular' attendance as at least 90% of the time. This is equivalent to missing 1 day of school each fortnight or four weeks of school across a school year.

The objective of this audit was to assess whether student attendance is effectively managed in NSW Government schools for students from Kindergarten to Year 10. In making this assessment, the audit examined whether:

- there are effective systems and policies for managing student attendance
- the department effectively supports schools to manage student attendance
- schools are effectively managing student attendance.

Conclusion

There are too many students in NSW Government schools who regularly miss school. In Semester 1 of 2021, around a third of students in years 1–10 attended school less than 90% of the time—a level that puts their educational outcomes at risk. Attendance problems are widespread. 775 of 2,200 schools in NSW had an average attendance rate below 90% in 2021. Aboriginal student attendance is significantly below non-Aboriginal students and there is no specific strategy to address this gap. The department needs to place greater attention on supporting schools to lift student attendance.

Good quality data on attendance patterns is critical to developing strategies to address the underlying reasons for absence. The quality of the department's data on student attendance has improved from 2018. This has allowed it to monitor attendance more closely throughout the year, rather than relying on a yearly collection. However, there are still gaps in capturing and analysing the reasons for absence.

The improved data collection allowed the department to begin reporting on the 'attendance level' for the first time in 2018. This measures the proportion of students attending more than 90% of the time. The department has set State-wide and school-level targets to improve the attendance level. The new targets have influenced the focus of strategies to lift attendance. There is now a greater focus on lifting students above the reportable benchmark of 90% rather than addressing more serious attendance concerns.

The School Success Model formalises the focus on achieving school-level targets. When introduced, the department stated that schools would receive targeted support as part of the rollout of the model. Targeted support for attendance was initially planned to be delivered in late 2021 but was delayed due to the impact of COVID. The two main attendance support programs do not cater to schools with fewer than 100 students and there are gaps in support due to two different methodologies being used to select schools.

The Home School Liaison Program is a longstanding program to support students with low attendance. Requests for support are rationed pending availability of case officers, which leads to younger students being prioritised. Older students are not supported because there is a lower chance of prosecution in the legal system if attendance is not restored by the program. There is insufficient monitoring of the adequacy of resources, activities and long-term outcomes of this program.

The department's Aboriginal Education Policy aims to have Aboriginal students matching or exceeding outcomes of non-Aboriginal students. In Semester 1, 2021 42.7% of Aboriginal students attended school regularly (at least 90% of the time) compared with 70.3% of non-Aboriginal students. The gap in attendance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students has grown since 2018. There are relatively new programs supporting Aboriginal students in secondary school to attain their Higher School Certificate, but greater attention should be placed on supporting attendance for Aboriginal students in primary schools.

Schools are using a wide range of strategies to improve student attendance depending on their local contexts. Schools we spoke with told us of allocating responsibility to key staff members, closer monitoring of data, community engagement, rewards and incentives, before school sporting and breakfast programs, and partnerships with external agencies. The school planning and annual reporting process prompts schools to evaluate the impact of their strategies on progress towards their targets. The department could do more to promote evidence-based programs, showcase better practice examples from schools in NSW and identify the circumstances where these approaches are most effective.

1. Key findings

Around three in ten students are missing school at a level placing their education at risk

The department's Strategic Plan set a target to increase the proportion of students attending school at least 90% of the time between 2018 and 2022. It has found that missing more than ten per cent of school (equivalent to a month of schooling each year) can place a students' education at risk.

The proportion of Year 1–10 students attending school regularly (at least 90% of the time) fell from 74% in Semester 1, 2018 to 73.1% in 2019 and 67.9% in 2021. The department's preliminary data indicates that student attendance for Semester 1, 2022 will fall further due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-related absences and natural disasters.

Aggregate levels for Semester 1, 2021 mask lower attendance for some groups of students, including:

- students in years 7–10 (55.4% attended regularly)
- Aboriginal students (42.7% attended regularly)
- students in remote schools (40.3% attended regularly).

Better quality data has helped increase the focus on student attendance

Prior to 2018, the department did not have good access to student-level attendance data. Introducing a new student administration system in late 2017 allowed the department to begin analysing and reporting on attendance data in greater detail and closer to real time. This has improved central oversight and has been used to identify students with very low attendance. Since 2018, the department has improved its data analysis platform to provide relevant staff with access to detailed information they need to monitor attendance patterns.

Many NSW Government schools have chosen to use a third-party student administration system instead of the department's system. While the department has improved the timeliness of collecting data from these systems, there is further work remaining to increase data quality.

New targets have increased the focus towards students with 80–90% attendance

In 2018, the department set a state-wide target to increase the proportion of students attending school at least 90% of the time by 2022. It took until late 2020 to agree individual targets for schools to help achieve the overall state-wide target, which was to be achieved by 2022.

The short timeframe created a risk that schools would choose to focus on students already close to the 90% attendance benchmark, instead of students with lower attendance and more complex barriers to attending school. Similarly, the department has focused its resources and programs on identifying and supporting students already close to the 90% benchmark. The additional focus on students attending between 80–90% of the time is a positive development once the needs of students with the greatest barriers to attendance have been adequately addressed.

Targeted support programs have been delayed and are limited in scale

While the department identified student attendance as a priority in 2018, it did not begin to provide targeted support to schools until late 2021. This targeted support was postponed due to the impact of COVID and at the time of writing was scheduled to re-commence from Term 3, 2022. The fall in attendance between 2018 and 2019 should have prompted earlier intervention. The subsequent impacts of COVID-19 on student attendance have increased the need for support.

The School Success Model was introduced at the end of 2020 and stated that schools would be supported to reach their performance targets. The two main programs for attendance are referred to as guided and strategic support. These programs only address a portion of schools in need due to limited central resourcing. Schools with fewer than 100 students are not eligible for support through either program regardless of their needs. Small schools tend to have fewer support staff and access to external services, which makes implementing strategies to improve attendance more difficult. Smaller schools are more likely to be in rural and remote areas, which raises concerns over the equity of support.

It will be important for the department to monitor and evaluate the impact of these programs once delivered and consider whether they are effectively targeted to areas of greatest need.

More attention needs to be placed on supporting attendance for Aboriginal students

In Semester 1, 2021 42.7% of Aboriginal students in Years 1–10 attended school regularly compared with 70.3% of non-Aboriginal students. The department's Aboriginal Education Policy has a goal that Aboriginal students will match or better the outcomes of the broader student population. Since 2018, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student attendance has widened, rather than narrowed.

The department is currently focusing its efforts on increasing the proportion of Aboriginal students attaining the Higher School Certificate by 50%, while maintaining their cultural identity. It has set a target to be achieved by 2023, which means its focus is on Aboriginal students in secondary school. The department's research indicates the importance of setting positive attendance patterns in early primary school. In Semester 1, 2021 51.5% of Aboriginal students in years 1–6 attended school regularly compared to 77.0% of non-Aboriginal students. There should be more focus placed on reducing the 25.5 percentage point attendance gap for primary school settings.

There is insufficient monitoring of the effectiveness of the Home School Liaison Program

Under the *Education Act 1990* (NSW) parents and guardians are responsible for ensuring their child receives compulsory education to the age of 17. When a school has serious concerns about a student's attendance, they can request assistance from the Home School Liaison Program. This program aims to address the factors preventing attendance through escalating interventions that can involve legal action if attendance is not restored following all reasonable efforts. The program prioritises support for younger students and accepts fewer requests to support students close to the school leaving age because there is a lower chance of completing legal action.

There is insufficient monitoring and reporting on activities and outcomes of the program. In the absence of robust data, staff we spoke with reported difficulties in engaging parents with the program and situations where attendance is restored for a brief period while students are being monitored before falling again. Monitoring longer-term attendance patterns of students who have taken part in the program would help to identify the settings where the program is most effective.

Schools across the State are using a range of strategies to improve attendance

The department's research identifies key elements of effective practices in relation to student attendance. It has published this research and resources for schools to use. Most schools we spoke with were aware of the department's attendance resources and advised they provided a good starting point to further customise according to the school's local context.

Schools we spoke with told us they were using a broad range of strategies to address underlying causes of absences. These included additional school buses, breakfast clubs, sporting programs, reward and incentive programs, additional student wellbeing support, culturally appropriate practices and referrals to external agencies. These strategies require ongoing staff time and resources to be sustained and effective. Schools we spoke with told us some of these programs were supported by staff volunteering their time and resources from external organisations.

2. Recommendations

By March 2023, the Department of Education should:

1. publicly renew its commitment to improving student attendance beyond the end of Strategic Plan 2018–22 with new state-wide and school-level attendance targets

2. expand the use of supplementary targets for schools with complex student cohorts (e.g. reducing the proportion of students with attendance rates below 80%)

3. evaluate the Universal, Guided, and Strategic attendance support resources and programs to assess impact, identify potential gaps and improve on existing resources

4. improve transparency by publicly reporting the attendance level measure for individual schools on the department's website and in school annual reports

5. improve the analysis and reporting of attendance data to support targeted strategies and programs by:

    a) improving the quality and timeliness of attendance data from third-party vendors

    b) reviewing trends in attendance for priority equity cohorts

    c) collecting better quality information on the reasons for absence

6. finalise the attendance policy, procedure and codes review and develop resources to support schools in implementing the new settings

7. review the approach to enforcing compulsory school attendance, including:

    • the adequacy and distribution of Home School Liaison Program resources

    • the appropriateness of reporting lines and links with other central support positions

    • program costs and long-term outcomes

    • the relative effectiveness compared to early intervention approaches.

By June 2023, the Department of Education should:

8. update its attendance strategies and programs based on the results of trial programs and provide commensurate resourcing to meet the revised student attendance targets

9. review the current range of strategies and programs supporting attendance for Aboriginal students and address any gaps (e.g. strategies and programs for younger students) in consultation with relevant stakeholder groups.

1. Introduction

1.1   Student attendance in NSW Government schools

Why attendance matters

Attending school regularly is essential to a student's education and development. Even the best educational programs and teachers will not improve a student's education unless they are in school to benefit from them.

Most students will miss a few days of school each year due to illness or unforeseen circumstances. These absences are usually unavoidable and justified. Unjustified absences (also referred to as unexplained or unauthorised absences) occur when parents or carers fail to explain to the school why their child was absent. These absences are influenced by a combination of family, school, and individual student factors.

Regardless of whether the absence is justified or not, frequent absences can negatively affect a student's education. Students who miss one day of school per fortnight, miss four weeks of school per year, and the equivalent of an entire year of school in their lifetime.

Regularly absent students are at greater risk of:

- lower scores and poor academic outcomes
- dropping out of school before Year 12
- social isolation from the school, community, and peers
- long-term mental health and social functioning issues
- involvement with criminal activity
- requiring social assistance.

Given the link between attendance, academic performance, and other long-term outcomes, reducing student absenteeism is an important strategy to improve education in New South Wales.

Student attendance patterns in New South Wales

The department expects students to attend school at least 95% of the time. It highlights that attending school less than 90% of the time (equivalent to four weeks of school each year) puts a students' educational outcomes at risk. In this report, we have defined attendance of at least 90% of the time as 'regular' school attendance.

Exhibit 1 shows attendance rates between Semester 1, 2018 and 2021. In 2018, the average attendance rate for students from Years 1–10 was 91.6%. From 2018 to 2019, attendance rates fell by 0.5% to 91.1%. In Semester 1 of 2020, COVID-19 restrictions required students to learn from home for extended periods of time (attendance data is not comparable for this year). When students returned to schools in Semester 1 2021, the attendance rate was 90.1%.

Exhibit 1: Attendance rate for Year 1–10 students in NSW Government schools, Semester 1 2018–2021 (%)
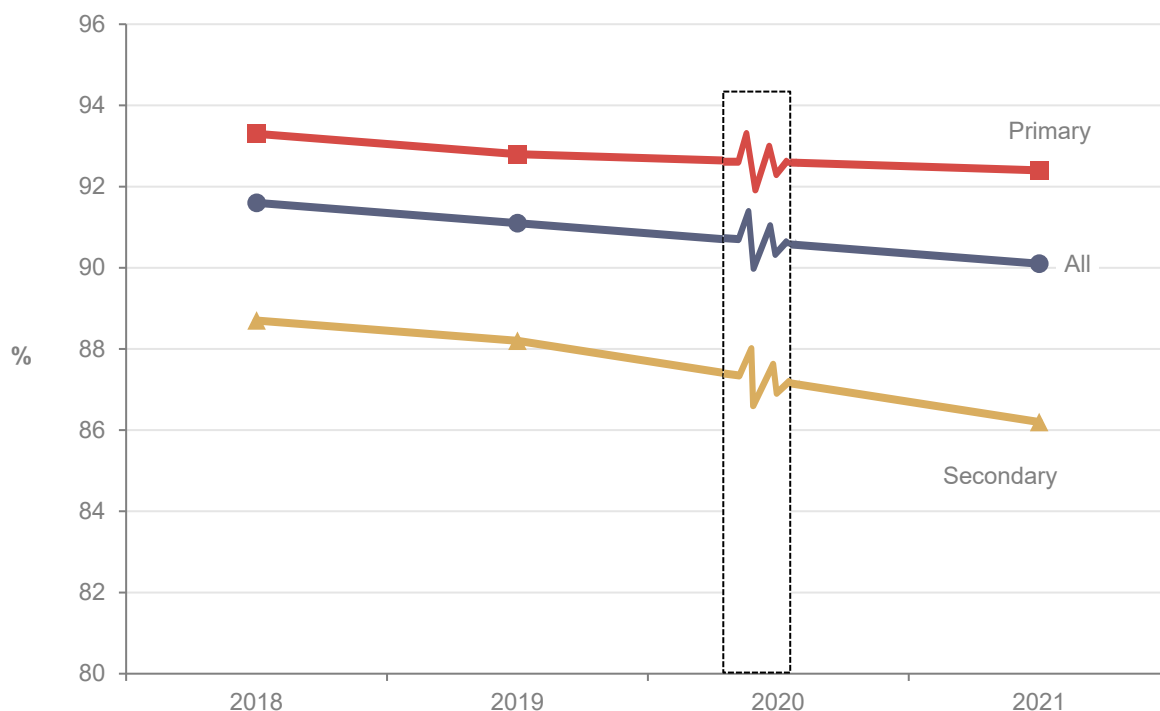
Notes: 2020 data was excluded because students were required to learn from home for several periods due to COVID-19 related disruptions.

Source: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2022).

## Policy context for Aboriginal student attendance

Since 2008, New South Wales has been a party to the national agreement on Closing the Gap to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes. From 2014 to 2018, this included a specific target on student attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In 2008, the department released the Aboriginal Education policy to define its commitments in schools. These included a commitment to a goal that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will match or better the outcomes of the broader student population.

In 2012, the department launched the Connected Communities strategy, which aimed to address the educational and social disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children and young people living in complex and disadvantaged communities. The Strategy is underpinned by a commitment to ongoing partnership with Aboriginal communities, supporting Aboriginal people to actively influence and fully participate in social, economic and cultural life. The Strategy initially included 15 schools but was later expanded and was operating in 31 schools in 2022.

Despite this focus, in New South Wales, Aboriginal student attendance has fallen more than non-Aboriginal student attendance over the past three years (Exhibit 2). In Semester 1, 2018 52.7% of Aboriginal students attended school regularly (a gap of 23.1 percentage points compared with non-Aboriginal students). In Semester 1, 2021, 42.7% of Aboriginal students attended school regularly compared to 70.3% of non-Aboriginal students (a gap of 27.6 percentage points).

Exhibit 2: Difference between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students' attendance in NSW Government schools in Semester 1 2018, 2019 and 2021

Proportion of students attending school at least 90% of the time
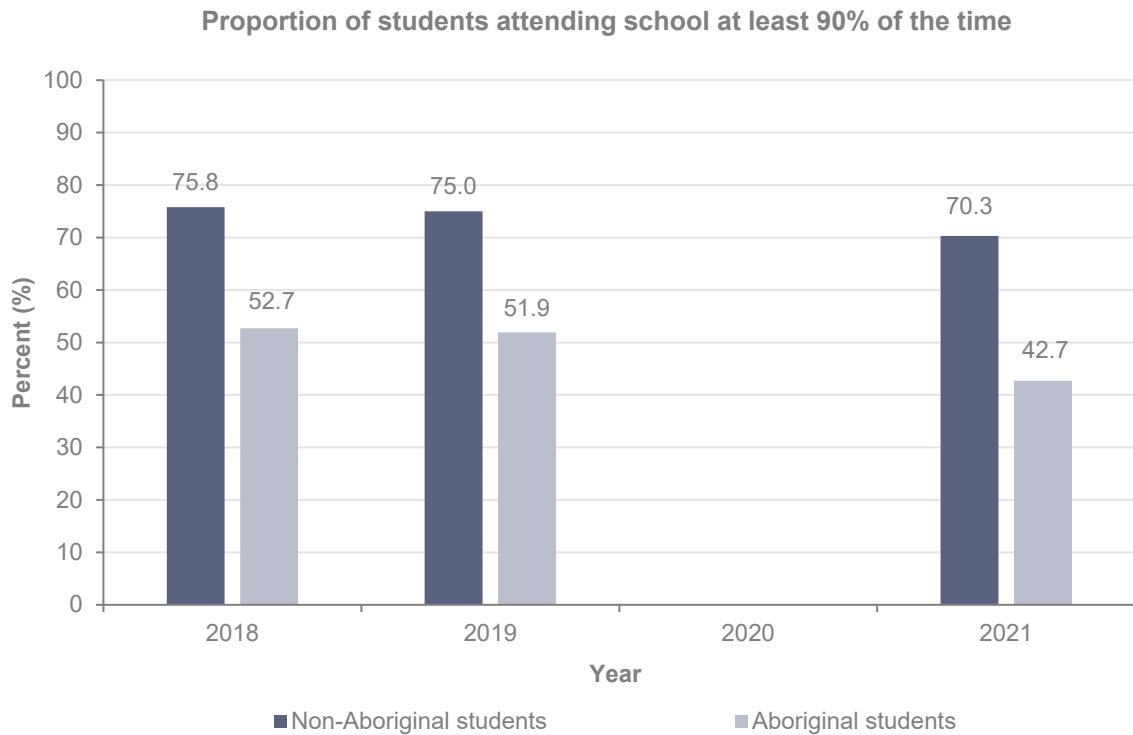
Notes: Attendance data are for students in Years 1–10 only. Data for 2020 is not comparable due to the impact of COVID on attendance.
Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2022).

In 2020, a new educational target was set under Close the Gap - to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20–24) attaining year 12 or an equivalent qualification to 96% by 2031. To reach the new target in New South Wales, attainment will need to increase 31.7 percentage points above the baseline of 64.3% in 2019. This outcome aims to be achieved by improving Aboriginal student attendance rates and retention, reducing the barriers preventing attendance, and supporting them to complete year 12.

NSW has also set a Premier's Priority target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal students attaining a Year 12 qualification by 50% by 2023 (from 46% to 69%), while maintaining their cultural identity. This priority recognises the link between attaining a Year 12 qualification and positive future employment and higher educational outcomes, and is an important step towards achieving Closing the Gap commitments.

Legal responsibilities for student attendance

The *Education Act 1990* (NSW) (the Act) states the legal responsibilities for student attendance. Under the Act, parent or carers are responsible for ensuring their child receives compulsory schooling. Children must commence school by age six and then complete Year 10. After Year 10 or until they turn 17, students must either be:

- in school or registered for home schooling
- in approved education or training (e.g. TAFE, traineeship, apprenticeship)
- in full-time, paid employment (average 25 hours/week)
- in a combination of work, education and/or training.

Schools support parents and carers to comply with their legal requirements by monitoring student attendance and helping to address attendance issues when they emerge.

The Act provides several options for dealing with habitual non-attendance of students, including:

- sharing of information between government agencies and non-government organisations to assist in ascertaining the whereabouts of a child not meeting their obligations
- compulsory attendance conferences, which involve parents, students and other people who are likely to be able to help resolve attendance issues
- compulsory schooling orders, which are enforceable orders made by the Children's Court
- action taken against a parent or guardian in the Local Court for a breach of a compulsory schooling order where a fine or community service order may be imposed.

Policy framework for student attendance

The department is responsible for overseeing the management of student attendance across government schools. It sets strategies, policies and procedures to assist schools to accurately record student attendance, follow-up on reasons for non-attendance and improve attendance of students who are educationally at-risk due to unacceptable levels of non-attendance.

The School Attendance Policy (2015) is the overarching policy for the attendance of students. It identifies that encouraging regular attendance is a core school responsibility. It sets out the responsibilities of parents and carers, principals, directors and executive directors in relation to attendance.

The Student Attendance in Government Schools Procedure (2015) supports the School Attendance Policy with greater details of how to manage student attendance within schools.

The Attendance support program provides direct assistance to schools for managing serious instances of non-attendance. Schools can apply for support from a centralised pool of Home School Liaison Officers and Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers.

Student attendance targets

Increased student attendance is one of the department's key priorities. It has set a target to increase the proportion of students attending school more than 90% of the time from 79.4% (2018) to 82% (2022) for primary school students (years 1–6), and 64.5% (2018) to 70% (2022) for secondary school students (years 7–10).

Under the School Success Model, the department set individual targets for schools to be achieved by 2022 (later deferred to 2023 due to the impacts of floods and COVID on schools). School-level targets were benchmarked against similar schools. The department stated it would hold system leaders accountable for ensuring schools meet their targets. The Model outlined that schools that have greater needs would receive strengthened support and direction.

1.2   About the audit

The objective of this audit was to assess whether student attendance is effectively managed in government schools from Kindergarten to Year 10. The audit focused on:

- attendance systems and policies
- guidelines and programs to support schools
- school strategies and programs to support attendance
- attendance rates of students from Kindergarten to Year 10.

The audit interviewed ten schools as case studies. These schools included a mix of school types (primary, secondary, central, schools for specific purposes) and locations (metropolitan, inner regional, outer regional).

The timeframe examines data and activities from 2018 to 2022.

2. Systems and policies

This chapter considers the effectiveness of systems to accurately collect, analyse and report student attendance data. It also considers the effectiveness of policies and procedures to support attendance and central oversight of attendance issues.

2.1 Data collection

Student attendance data quality has improved significantly since 2018

The department started collecting student-level attendance data into a centralised database in 2018. Between 2012 and 2017, data did not comply with national reporting standards because it did not include partial day absences. The department estimated that including part-day absences reduced the overall reported attendance rate by 0.47 percentage points in 2018 (0.7 percentage points for Aboriginal students). This change has improved the accuracy of student attendance reporting and enabled accurate benchmarking against other States and Territories.

Collecting student-level attendance data has improved data quality by enabling checks that data had been properly loaded. It also gave access to reasons for absence and absence by day of the week for the first time. For example, student attendance is lowest on Fridays and the majority of justified absences are due to sickness (64% in 2019). Access to student-level data has enabled more thorough analysis of attendance and better targeting of interventions.

Collecting student-level data allowed the department to report on the 'attendance level' measure. This refers to the proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time. The measure is as a key part of national reporting alongside the attendance rate. The attendance level measure is volatile as many students attend around 90% of the time, meaning small changes in attendance can move a student above or below this threshold.

Further work is underway to improve data quality and reduce manual processing

The department introduced a new school administration management system in late 2017, which included capture of attendance data. A large portion of schools have since chosen to use third-party school administration systems. Schools currently individually contract with multiple third-party providers for access to systems, which increases risks to data security and privacy. The department plans to establish central contracts with third-party providers to address these risks.

Up to early 2021, schools were required to manually transfer data from their third-party system into a central system at least once per week. The department's internal audit function found that 14% of schools reviewed in Term 1 of 2021 were not transferring data weekly. Since mid-2021, data has been automatically collected from third-party provider systems daily. This has improved the timeliness and completeness of data available centrally and analysis and regular reporting.

It is important to have confidence in the quality of attendance data as it is used to monitor schools and students throughout the year. At the end of Term 2 each year, schools review and confirm their data to ensure it is of high quality for national reporting. This process includes:

- verifying the number of days each school was open (e.g. excluding unforeseen closures)
- verifying enrolment details (e.g. students who changed enrolment during the year)
- checking days with no marked rolls (e.g. errors in uploading information).

Throughout the rest of the year, a central team manually checks for errors in attendance data as it is uploaded and contacts schools to resolve issues. Reliance on manual checks and corrections increases central and school workloads.

The department's plans to establish central contracts with third-party providers will allow it to set mandatory minimum requirements for capture and recording of attendance data. If implemented well, this should improve the consistency of data from schools and reduce manual corrections.

2.2   Data analysis and reporting

A standard data analysis platform allows relevant staff to examine student attendance data

Since 2018, teachers, principals, directors and corporate staff have been able to access customisable reports on attendance through a data and analysis platform – Scout. The department provides online training to help users navigate the platform. Having a standard platform supports staff to compare student attendance between different schools and networks.

Scout produces reports at a network, school, cohort and student level. Different levels of reporting helps to meet the needs of teachers, principals, directors and corporate staff. The reports have standard graphs and charts that can be customised through data slicers. Data can be examined according to factors including gender, Aboriginality, English background and disability. The ability to customise reports supports staff to identify specific students that require support.

Network reports allow Directors to easily compare schools' attendance rates and progress against targets. This allows Directors to identify and focus on schools that are not on track to meet targets or with large numbers of students in lower attendance bands. Directors we spoke with were confident in using Scout reports to monitor attendance patterns for schools in their networks.

Eight of the ten schools we spoke with told us that they preferred using their third-party system to monitor trends in attendance rather than Scout. Their reasons included a preference for different report formats, better links to student behaviour information and a distrust of the accuracy of Scout data.

A high rate of unexplained absences prevents detailed analysis on reasons for absence

Knowing the reasons why students are not attending school is an important part of developing appropriate strategies to improve attendance at an individual, school and system level. The department's data indicates that in 2019, 45% of absences were unexplained or unjustified. This prevents analysis on the reasons for absence when no explanation is received.

Absences are currently sorted into five categories for reporting in the department's system:

- leave - school principal accepts a reason for leave (e.g. attendance at a funeral)
- sick - due to sickness or medical appointment
- suspended - student was suspended from school
- unexplained - an explanation was not received from parents or carers within seven days
- unjustified - an explanation was received from parents or carers but not accepted by the principal.

The document detailing school attendance codes has not been updated since 2015. It is important that schools consistently interpret reasons for absence to allow meaningful comparisons across schools. The department has recognised the need to provide schools with greater clarity on the 'leave' absence code as a priority. This code is subjective as the school principal determines whether to accept the reason for leave, otherwise the absence is recorded as unjustified.

Further guidance is also needed to support usage of the 'flexible learning' attendance code. The 2015 guidelines defined flexible learning as where students are participating in a flexible timetable and are not required to be at school (e.g. vocational courses, HSC examinations). More recently, the flexible learning code was used to record attendance when students were required to learn from home due to COVID-19 related reasons. Inconsistent use of the flexible learning code will distort absence data in circumstances where students are unable to physically attend school.

The standard attendance codes don't provide meaningful information on the reasons for absence. Alongside standard codes, schools record reasons for student absence as free text comments in school administration systems. The department's data science team looked at whether machine learning could accurately categorise reasons for absence. It sorted absence comments into 14 categories and found machine learning could accurately predict around 80% of comments. This type of approach could provide richer data to target interventions based on reasons for absence.

Further information should be publicly reported for individual schools and equity cohorts

Public reporting of data is an important element of accountability for outcomes. While the department has set the attendance level measure (proportion of students attending greater than 90% of the time) as a key target, there is limited public reporting on the level and target at a school level. School annual reports for 2021 detail the student attendance rate but do not show the attendance level for the school. This information is only available on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's MySchool website.

The National School Reform Agreement (2021) outlines that attendance data should be disaggregated by priority equity cohorts where available. The cohorts include Aboriginal students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with a disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The department publishes an annual report on attendance that makes comparisons between selected equity groups but this is not comprehensive or consistent across reporting years. Further work could be done to establish appropriate definitions for reporting on attendance for students with a disability.

2.3   Policies and procedures

The student attendance policy and procedures have not been kept up-to-date

The current student attendance policy and supporting procedures have not been updated since 2015. The department identified the need to review the policy, procedures and guidelines in 2020 and an internal audit in September 2021 also recommended they be updated. Regularly updating policy, procedures and guidelines is important to ensure they incorporate the latest evidence, incorporate new roles and responsibilities, and refer to the correct supports and resources. At the time of writing, the department had commenced a project to update attendance policies, procedures and codes. It aims to implement the new policies and procedures in 2022.

The guidelines supporting the Home School Liaison Program have not been updated since 2011. The document has multiple broken links and references to areas of the department and external agencies that are no longer current. The department advised that it had commenced work to update the guidelines, which will reflect changes in attendance policy and procedures.

Greater attention needs to be placed on reducing unexplained absences

In 2021, the department's research centre reviewed the drivers of school attendance and best practice approaches to reduce non-attendance. The review report cited previous studies that found unjustified or unexplained absences have a greater impact on achievement than authorised absences. Understanding the reasons for absence can help schools to intervene early to address any emerging problems. The department advised that it is currently reviewing its standard absence codes and this will provide further information on understanding the causes of absence.

The department's data indicates that in Semester 1 of 2019, 45% of whole day absences were unjustified or unexplained. Unjustified and unexplained absences are greater for secondary students than primary students. For example, Year 1 students had an average of around two unjustified or unexplained absences for Semester 1, 2019 compared with an average of seven days for Year 10 students. Different strategies may be required for primary and secondary schools.

The School Attendance Policy requires schools to undertake all reasonable measures to contact parents or carers within two school days of an absence being unexplained. Each term, the department's internal audit branch reviews a sample of schools for compliance across a range of areas, including with attendance policy. From 2018 to 2021, it regularly identified schools that were not complying with requirements to contact parents or carers regarding part or whole day unexplained absences (21% of sampled schools in Term 2, 2021 did not fully comply). Further work should be done to understand why schools are not meeting these requirements and help them to do so.

The ten schools we spoke with told us they are using automatic messaging functions in third-party school management systems as a first step to seek an explanation when a student is absent. They reported following up parents or carers with phone calls if there was not a response but noted this was a time-consuming process and not all parents or carers respond to the calls.

3. Strategies and supports

This chapter considers the effectiveness of the department's strategies to improve student attendance and the support it provides to schools to achieve this. It also considers the effectiveness of school-level strategies and actions for students with low attendance.

3.1 Attendance targets

The School Success Model set school targets based on a 90% attendance rate

The department's Strategic Plan 2018–2022 set targets to increase the proportion of students attending school regularly (at least 90% of the time). The department identified separate targets for primary and secondary students, which recognised that attendance rates tend to be higher in primary compared to secondary years. The attendance targets only cover students in years 1–10, which aligns with the attendance level measure in national agreements.

At the start of 2021, the School Success Model introduced school-level targets described as being 'ambitious yet reasonable'. The school-level targets for student attendance align with the department's overall targets for primary and secondary schools. School-level targets were set to be achieved by 2022 to align with the Strategic Plan. This is a short timeframe for schools to implement strategies to improve student attendance, which may be affected by complex and long-standing issues for students and their families.

A key step in setting targets was to calculate a predicted attendance value for each school based on schools with similar socio-economic backgrounds. This approach helps ensure schools are set targets that recognise the socio-economic context they operate in. It also helps to identify how schools are performing relative to their peers. Schools starting from a lower base were required to achieve a greater increase in attendance rates to meet their targets. This information could have been used upfront to identify those schools in need of additional support to meet targets.

95 schools with low attendance rates were set a secondary target to also reduce the proportion of students attending less than 80% of the time. Very small schools developed their own targets based on their local contexts, rather than having a centrally determined target.

The new target has encouraged a focus on students already close to 90% attendance rather than addressing barriers for students with more complex challenges

The attendance level target encourages schools to focus on students close to the 90% threshold. For example, moving a student from 89 to 90% attendance has an equal impact on achieving the target as moving a student from 50 to 90% attendance. Supporting the student with 50% attendance requires considerably more effort and resources. Setting only a single performance measure and target can risk encouraging a narrow focus on achieving that target.

Standard Scout reports are set up in a way that focuses on cohorts of students close to the 90% threshold. For example, a summary chart splits students into three groupings—above 90%, between 85 to 90%, and below 85%. The department's initial training videos encouraged schools to give individual attention to students between 85 to 90% attendance with the intention of lifting them above the 90% threshold. This focus risks diverting individual attention away from students with lower attendance rates and more complex barriers to attending school regularly.

The Improving Attendance Program trial explicitly targeted schools with a large number of students attending between 80 to 89% of the time. In a review of the trial, schools cautioned that the department should not lose focus on students with attendance rates below 80%.

The state-wide target and school-level targets do not give enough prominence to priority equity cohorts. For example, the gap in the proportion of students attending school regularly between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students increased from 23.1 to 27.6 percentage points between 2018 and 2021.

Few schools were on track to meet targets in 2022, and these have now been extended to 2023

In May 2022, the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning announced that school attendance targets would be extended from 2022 to 2023 due to the impacts of COVID and floods. As at 1 June 2022 only 35 of 1,624 primary schools and one of 435 secondary schools were on track to meet the attendance targets. A few extra days of student absences (for example, due to COVID isolation requirements) can have a large effect on the number of students reaching the 90% attendance threshold.

Exhibit 3 below shows the student attendance level in 2019 and 2021 was below the 2022 target. Student attendance fell significantly lower in Term 1 of 2022 (attributed to the effects of COVID and floods). Directors and schools we spoke with told us that attendance has continued to be affected by community sickness in Term 2 of 2022. Schools we spoke with reported they were less likely to focus on attendance targets when they seem unachievable.

Exhibit 3: Student attendance level in NSW Government schools in Semester 1 2019, 2021 and 2022
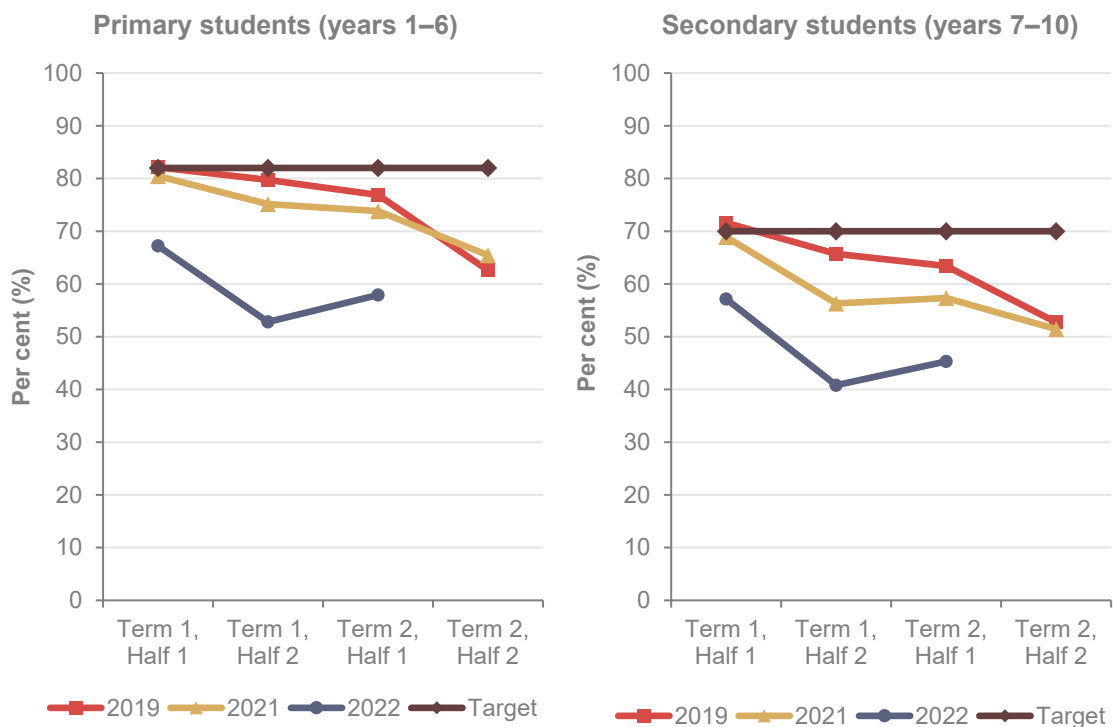
Note: Data as at 1 June 2022.
Note: Data for 2020 not included due to the impact of COVID learning from home requirements.
Source: Department of Education (2022).

3.2 Universal support resources

Schools can access attendance guidelines and a range of resources through a central site

The School Success Model commenced in 2021, replacing the Local Schools, Local Decisions policy. It aims to strengthen support for schools to make evidence-based decisions with clearer responsibility for performance targets. Student attendance is one of six key target areas, which include literacy and numeracy, Year 12 attainment and post-school destinations. The target to improve student attendance was originally set to be achieved in 2022, meaning it was critical that resources be available to support schools in 2021 as they implemented their school plans.

As the School Success Model was implemented, a tiered system of support was established based on the school's level of need (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4: School Success Model – three main types of support for schools

Universal support	Guided support	Strategic support
A self-service support type delivered through a central hub, or professional learning. Curated and quality assured evidence-based resources available to schools.	Targeted guidance by Directors and/or specialists to identify, discuss and support the implementation of appropriate universal resources. Guidance provided for specific areas identified by the system and/or schools.	Intensive and customised support delivered by dedicated specialists in collaboration with the school's leadership and Directors. Support provided for specific areas identified by the system and/or schools.

Source: Department of Education (2022).

All schools were provided with access to the base level of support through the Attendance Matters intranet website in 2021. This site includes resources such as example strategies, planning templates, process maps and posters. Universal resources form the base of the guided support program, with Directors or specialists advising schools on the best ways to implement universal resources. The resources on the Attendance Matters site are a good starting point for schools to examine current practices and develop further actions to improve how they manage attendance.

A quality review of attendance resources identified several areas for improvement

When released, the School Success Model emphasised that the department would provide schools with evidence-based guidance on effective practice that improves student outcomes. To support this, the department established a quality assurance process to check that universal resources are high quality and evidence-based. It is important that schools are confident in the quality of resources provided centrally to increase the likelihood they are implemented.

The resources on the Attendance Matters intranet site have gone through the quality assurance process. Quality reviewers suggested that more effort was needed for resources to demonstrate their evidence base, ensure linkages with existing frameworks, include clear instructions for implementation and identify ways to assess whether they are leading to positive change.

The department is trialling approaches to raise awareness of the importance of attending school

Engaging parents and carers in recognising the importance of attendance can support students to regularly attend school. The department's research identifies the positive role of setting high expectations for attendance and increasing family engagement with the school. The department identified interstate and overseas examples where community engagement has contributed to improved attendance. It is difficult to directly attribute the effects of communications campaigns on student attendance given they are generally run as part of a broad range of strategies.

In line with this research, the department ran the Pioneering Attendance Trial in Term 2, 2021. The trial was run across 63 schools and aimed to improve parental engagement through weekly SMS messages. A review of the trial concluded that while parent engagement and attitudes to attendance improved, there was no overall improvement in attendance rates.

The department has developed a communication campaign aiming to increase awareness of the value of attendance and lift attendance rates. The department is undertaking pre- and post-campaign surveys to evaluate the impact of advertising on attitudes towards attendance. Evaluating the impact of advertising is important to demonstrate that it leads to both improved attitudes towards attendance and that also translates into improved attendance on the ground.

More could be done to showcase effective attendance practices in NSW schools

Another part of the School Success Model is the Ambassador Schools program. This aims to identify high-performing schools and research what makes them successful. The department has selected ten schools for the program based on their performance across a range of measures (including attendance). The schools cover primary and secondary levels, metropolitan and regional areas, and different socio-economic backgrounds. While primarily focused on academic outcomes, this initiative could identify and expand successful local practices relating to attendance.

The department's research team had also planned to examine effective attendance practices for a selection of case study schools in 2021. This was cancelled due to disruptions in student attendance due to the impact of COVID. Revisiting this case study program could help showcase effective practices in attendance across a range of NSW contexts.

Directors and schools we spoke with told us that their main sources of advice are what other schools are doing in their local network. While local context is important, this approach can limit consideration of a broader range of strategies that schools are using to address similar barriers.

3.3   Targeted support programs

State-wide rollout of guided and strategic support programs has been significantly delayed

The School Success Model is based on increasing accountability of schools to meet central priorities while providing support to schools that need it the most. In late 2020, the School Success Model flagged tailored support would be provided to schools that required significant improvement to meet targets. The target to improve student attendance was originally set for 2022, meaning it was critical that targeted support be provided to schools in need during 2021.

The guided support program builds on universal resources and is prioritised to schools based on the number of students needed to move above 90% attendance. Delivery of guided support commenced in Term 3, 2021 but was postponed due to the impact of COVID. At the time of writing, it was scheduled to be delivered in Term 3, 2022.

The guided support program is largely based on the Improving Attendance Program trial. This pilot program was run in late 2020 and early 2021 in 178 schools. The pilot aimed to increase the number of students attending school regularly by improving data monitoring, strengthening school procedures and raising expectations. A review report found that most activities had been implemented but it was too early to make reliable conclusions about results. The review report identified lessons from the trial and recommended improvements for future initiatives. Thorough analysis and identifying lessons from pilot programs helps improve wider rollout.

The strategic support program is proposed to be more customised and is prioritised to schools with the lowest attendance rates. The program originally identified 47 schools with average attendance rates between 47% and 84.2% for support. At the time of writing, the department advised program was scheduled to be delivered in Term 4, 2022 but that the format, length and content of strategic support was under development and the selection of schools was also under review.

Eligibility criteria for each program has led to gaps in support for some schools

The School Success Model does not clearly identify when schools will qualify for extra support. Documents explaining the model say that the approach 'is based on the school's current results and their level of need to achieve progress' and that 'the greater the need, the greater level of support is given to schools'. As resources are limited, it is important to ensure the tiered system of support is focused on the schools requiring the greatest assistance.

The guided support program prioritised 115 schools based on the number of students needed to move above 90% attendance. This method meant 14 schools with an average attendance rate above 90% are included. One of these schools had an attendance rate of 94.5% in Semester 1, 2021 – higher than 1,777 other schools. Basing the method on the overall number of students meant larger schools were more likely to be prioritised for support than smaller schools.

In late 2021, the strategic support program identified 47 schools with the lowest attendance rates to receive support in 2022. The number of schools identified was due to capacity constraints, rather than need. The different selection methods between programs meant six schools were originally identified to receive both guided and strategic support. In June 2022, the department proposed to reduce the program from 47 to 22 schools. This was due to limited capacity of central staff because of their involvement in delivering other initiatives, removing schools receiving guided support, and to avoid overburdening schools that were participating in other strategic support programs (e.g. Aboriginal HSC attainment).

Both the guided and strategic support programs excluded schools with fewer than 100 students. There were 19 schools with an attendance rate below 80% that did not qualify for either support because of their size. Smaller schools are more likely to be outside of major cities, have fewer support staff and less access to external services. While these schools can use universal resources, this does not take into account their considerable challenges with attendance.

Both programs are predominantly targeted at secondary schools. 43 of the 47 schools originally targeted to receive strategic support and 100 of the 115 schools originally targeted to receive guided support are secondary schools. Secondary schools typically have lower attendance than primary schools. Using common eligibility criteria has meant secondary schools were more likely to be identified for support than primary schools. The department's research has emphasised the importance of establishing good attendance patterns in early years, suggesting more could be done to support primary schools.

Aboriginal student attendance remains significantly below non-Aboriginal students and there is no specific strategy to address this gap

Substantial investment has been made by successive governments to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. While a considerable number of Aboriginal students achieve outstanding educational outcomes and results, performance data indicates a substantial and ongoing gap between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers.

In relation to school attendance, 42.7% of Aboriginal students attended school regularly in Semester 1, 2021. The gap in regular school attendance between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students increased from 23.1 to 27.6 percentage points between 2018 and 2021. The substantial and growing gap is inconsistent with the department's Aboriginal Education Policy goal that Aboriginal students will match or better the outcomes of the broader student population.

The Connected Communities strategy was launched in 2012, aiming to address the educational and social disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children and young people living in a number of complex and disadvantaged communities. The strategy set a key deliverable that attendance rates for Aboriginal students are equal to the state average. A program evaluation in 2020 found that student attendance increased up to 2017 in Connected Communities primary schools but not in secondary schools. Between 2018 and 2021, attendance rates fell by an average of 5.6 percentage points in the 31 Connected Community schools across the State. Further attention is needed to lift attendance rates to meet the aims of the strategy.

Outside of the 31 Connected Communities schools and 26 Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers across the State, there is no specific strategy to address the gap in attendance rates for Aboriginal students. The department is currently focusing its efforts on increasing the proportion of Aboriginal students attaining the HSC by 50%, while maintaining their cultural identity. This aligns with a Premier's Priority target set in 2019 to be achieved by 2023. The relatively short timeframe to achieve this target means efforts are focused on retaining older students. For example, the Aboriginal Learning and Engagement Centres program selected secondary schools based on their potential to meet the Premier's Priority target.

The department's research emphasises the importance of setting positive patterns of school attendance early in primary school. In Semester 1, 2021 the proportion of Aboriginal primary students attending school regularly was 51.5% compared to 77.0% for non-Aboriginal students. Specific strategies focused on younger Aboriginal students could help set positive attendance patterns throughout later years of schooling. This would also help meet the national longer-term Closing the Gap target of increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20–24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96% by 2031.

The department re-affirmed its ongoing partnership with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group in 2020. It stated that the renewed partnership will focus on a strengths-based approach and committed to respectfully listening and learning to work towards common goals in Aboriginal education. To improve attendance for Aboriginal students, the department will need strong relationships with Aboriginal families, leaders, and their governance structures to seek their input and leadership in addressing attendance issues in their communities.

3.4 Intervention for individual students

The department lacks effective oversight over the Home School Liaison Program

The Home School Liaison Program aims to improve the attendance of students once a school has exhausted all other strategies. School principals apply for Home School Liaison support for individual students. If the application is accepted, a Home School Liaison Officer (HSLO) or an Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer (ASLO) will work with the school, student, and their family to develop an attendance improvement plan as a first step.

The HSLO/ASLO and the school will monitor the student's compliance with their attendance plan. Students who show improved attendance in the first weeks of the program can be removed from support. If the student's attendance declines again, the school must re-try school-level strategies before re-applying for support. This process can be time-consuming for the school and result in a cycle of adequate and inadequate attendance for students with recurring and complex issues.

There are 113 HSLOs and 26 ASLOs across the state (including three HSLO positions funded separately in recognition of the increased number of schools in the Sydney metropolitan region). The system for managing HSLO and ASLO applications and cases is not integrated with central data on student attendance. Therefore, the department cannot easily monitor whether students with very low attendance have been referred for HSLO and ASLO support. Some schools we spoke with told us that they can access HSLO and ASLO support when needed, while other schools could not due to HSLOs and ASLOs having a full caseload. When support is provided, several schools told us that attendance improves temporarily but the change is usually unsustainable, and the issues return when support is removed. The department does not monitor long-term attendance for students who have been supported by a HSLO or ASLO.

HSLOs and ASLOs are also responsible for conducting roll checks of schools to ensure they have accurate records of student attendance, and to identify students who have concerning attendance patterns. Schools with low attendance rates are supposed to have these checks every five weeks, while those with less attendance issues require them once a semester. The ten schools we spoke with had mixed feedback on the usefulness of the roll checks with some describing them as helpful for monitoring student attendance while others said they had limited value.

There are gaps in support for students in kindergarten and senior secondary school

To enforce compulsory schooling, HSLOs and ASLOs can take legal action against parents and students once all other strategies have been exhausted. As a result, students who are not of legal schooling age (below six or over 17 years) are generally not supported by the program.

Prioritising support towards younger students aligns with the department's research that shows attendance patterns are set in the early years of schooling. However, we were advised that requests for assistance for kindergarten students may be declined because the Education Act does not enforce compulsory attendance for students below the age of six.

The compulsory schooling requirement also does not apply to students 17 years or older. We were advised by Home School Liaison Program staff that students 15 years or older are generally not accepted into the program because they are too close to the school leaving age. This leaves a gap in the department's support for these students to improve their attendance.

The department is trialling a new program to support students in Years 8–10, attending school between 70–90% of the time who have been suspended 2–4 times. The Perfect Presence Pilot program funds external providers to develop individualised goals to support improved attendance. If successful, this could help address a gap in the Home School Liaison Program.

There is limited evidence of the effectiveness of legal action to restore student attendance

HSLOs and ASLOs refer students and their parents/guardians for legal action as a last resort when the program has not improved attendance. Before legal action is taken, HSLOs and ASLOs engage students and their parents/guardians in a Secretary's Conference. This is run by a trained external facilitator and aims to provide support that will resolve barriers to attendance. The department does not adequately monitor the use of these conferences or their long-term outcomes.

If a Secretary's conference is unsuccessful, legal action to enforce compulsory schooling can occur in the Children's Court or Local Court. The Children's court can issue compulsory schooling orders to students and their parents. If students and their parents do not comply with the Compulsory Schooling Order, then the department can apply for the Local Court to issue fines or other penalties. The department referred 2,313 cases to the courts between January 2018 and May 2021. Of these cases, around 5.6% resulted in fines being issued.

Staff we spoke with told us that courts rarely resolve student attendance issues long-term. Anecdotally, they believe court referrals are more likely to improve attendance for younger students than for older students. However, there is no evidence to support this conclusion because the department does not monitor long-term student outcomes after court cases.

A recent international review found insufficient evidence to show attendance approaches based on disincentives such as legal action are effective at increasing student attendance. Some schools told us that supportive intervention strategies involving school counsellors and other agencies are a better way to support student attendance. However, we were told that access to school counsellors is limited, particularly in regional areas. Access to support from other agencies and organisations can be mixed and largely depends on local relationships and knowledge.

There was a concerted effort to find students yet to return following COVID lockdowns

The state-wide COVID restrictions on face-to-face learning in schools were lifted for all students in October 2021. In the first week of schools re-opening, 54,116 students had not returned to school. School network directors and Home School Liaison Program officers worked with schools, families, and communities to identify and support students to return. By the end of 2021, the number of students who had not returned to schools had been reduced to 2,950. Of the 2,950 students that had not yet returned to school in 2022:

- 63% had known long-term attendance issues but were not receiving HSLO support
- 43% were Aboriginal students (compared to eight per cent in the total student population).

This shows a gap where the Home School Liaison Program is not supporting a substantial number of students with long-term attendance concerns, particularly Aboriginal students.

By March 2022, 653 students had not been on-site in schools since October 2021. Of these, the department's Wellbeing staff planned to investigate child protection concerns for 101 students whose parents were uncontactable. A further 279 students were identified as potentially vulnerable and prioritised for HSLO support. By May 2022 there were only 40 students yet to return.

3.5   School-level strategies

Actively managing attendance requires schools to dedicate additional resources

The department's research recognises that improving student attendance relies on adequate resourcing and capability building for strategies to be sustainable. Several schools we spoke with told us they have used some of their equity funding to employ additional staff to focus on attendance. Schools receive additional funding through the Resource Allocation Model to address the impacts of relative student disadvantage. The needs-based funding approach aims to provide additional resources for students and schools that need them the most.

The department's attendance guidelines recommend that schools have an attendance team that monitors and analyses attendance data regularly, supports the implementation of attendance, and communicates the importance of attendance to the community. Analysing data, investigating the underlying causes of absence and taking individualised approaches to support students can take substantial resources. This can be difficult given limited school resources and competing priorities.

Schools must follow-up with parents or guardians to seek explanations for student absences. Schools we spoke with told us this can amount to a significant workload where a large proportion of students regularly miss school. They reported difficulty getting some parents and guardians to respond to phone calls and can be met with negative or hostile responses when phone calls are answered. Schools we spoke with told us they generally preferred the classroom teacher (primary schools) or Head Teacher (secondary schools) to make these phone calls.

School strategic plans and annual reports did not transparently report attendance targets

The department requires schools to develop and publish a four-year strategic improvement plan. These were published at the beginning of 2021 and cover the period up to 2024. The plans outline how the school intends to improve student learning outcomes, as well as how it will monitor progress and make improvements to learning, teaching, and leading.

School strategic plans included a common target for improving the proportion of students attending 90% of the time above a 2018 baseline. We examined the strategic plans of 40 schools with low attendance rates to assess how targets were reported. 39 of the 40 schools did not report enough information to identify their 2018 baseline and target rate. Of the 40 schools:

- 15 identified the target rate but not the baseline (e.g. increase the percentage of students attending school more than 90% of the time to 50%)
- 22 identified the change but not the baseline or target rate (e.g. increase the percentage of students attending more than 90% of the time by four per cent)
- 2 did not identify either the baseline, target rate or change (e.g. increase the percentage of students attending more than 90% of the time)
- 1 school identified both the baseline and target rate (e.g. increase the percentage of students attending more than 90% of the time from 50.1% to 52.6%).

The 40 schools we examined took a variety of approaches to reporting progress in their 2021 annual reports, including:

- 6 schools identified only the direction of change (e.g. the number of students attending greater than 90% of the time or more has decreased)
- 14 schools identified the change but not the baseline or current state (e.g. the number of students attending greater than 90% of the time or more has decreased by 10.2%)
- 11 schools identified only the current state but not the baseline or target (e.g. the number of students attending greater than 90% of the time or more has decreased to 38.9%).

None of the schools we examined reported enough information to be able to identify their baseline, change from baseline, current state and target. The lack of clarity in reporting means that school performance against the attendance targets is not transparent. Clearly including the current and target attendance level in school strategic plans and annual reports would address this gap.

School strategic plans for 2021–24 did not clearly identify specific attendance initiatives

School strategic improvement plans outline the initiatives the school plans to put in place to reach the targeted outcomes and how they will monitor progress towards those outcomes. As student attendance is included as a common target for schools, we expected schools to identify specific initiatives in their 2021–2024 strategic improvement plans to meet their individually set targets.

We examined the strategic plans of 40 schools with low attendance rates to assess how they planned to improve attendance. 13 of the 40 schools identified clear initiatives focused on attendance. Eight of the 40 schools did not specifically mention attendance in their initiatives. The remaining plans focused on initiatives to improve student wellbeing and engagement. While these factors can support attendance, we expected more of the schools with the lowest attendance rates to include direct actions focused on student attendance.

Two of the 40 schools we examined directly copied their attendance initiatives from a sample plan provided by the department. This suggests that some schools need more support to develop school-specific attendance initiatives to meet their attendance targets.

The department requires schools to outline their progress towards achieving the initiatives in their Strategic Improvement Plan each year in an annual report. This report aims to ensure Principals are held accountable to their community for school progress and the impact of their initiatives. We examined the annual reports of the same 40 schools for 2021, expecting them to report on their actions to improve student attendance in the first year of their four-year strategic plans.

Twenty-one of the 40 schools reported they had allocated funding to directly target their attendance initiatives. This included establishing an attendance team or employing staff to monitor and support attendance. All of the remaining schools reported using funding in a way that could indirectly support attendance, for example through supporting student wellbeing or hiring Aboriginal Education Officers. Publicly reporting on the use and impact of school funds improves transparency over additional school funding.

Schools are supporting students to attend school in a wide range of ways

Schools we spoke with told us of a range of strategies to support student attendance. These strategies aim to address the underlying reasons of student absence, for example:

- breakfast clubs and the provision of recess and lunch to students without their own food
- additional buses to pick up students for school who do not have access to transport
- providing free school uniforms and equipment to students who do not have their own
- pre-school programs to support the transition to kindergarten
- local school collaboration to support the transition from primary to secondary school
- sports-based programs such as the PCYC Fitness for Life Program
- health and social support from the NSW Health Wellbeing and Health In-Reach Nurse Coordinator Program
- School Liaison Police officers who build relationships between the school, community and police through different strategies and educational programs.

Schools we spoke with reported they use their supplementary funding, seek funding from local charities, or partner with external agencies to implement many programs. Some programs rely on school staff volunteering their time (e.g. for breakfast clubs). They reported most programs were based on their own research and outreach to external organisations.

The department could provide more support for schools by promoting the range of available approaches, facilitating agreements with external organisations and evaluating the impact of strategies where they are used across multiple schools.

Section two

Appendices

Appendix one – Response from agency

NSW GOVERNMENT | Education

Ms Margaret Crawford   DGL22/445
Auditor-General for New South Wales
GPO Box 12
SYDNEY NSW 2001

mail@audit.nsw.gov.au

Dear Ms Crawford

Thank you for your correspondence of 24 August 2022, regarding the final report of the Performance Audit on Student Attendance.

The Department is strongly committed to supporting students in every aspect of their learning in order to achieve their full potential. The Department is responsible for ensuring students attend school and continues to work with all our public schools to improve performance on student attendance throughout the system.

I am particularly pleased the audit acknowledges the improvements achieved in attendance data capacity and the potential for these improvements to significantly improve student outcomes. The Department has carefully considered the audit report and I am pleased to accept or support in principle all recommendations. The Department is committed to making significant progress on each of the recommendations in the nominated timeframes. Effective implementation for some of the recommendations may require additional time. Please find enclosed the Department's detailed response to each recommendation.

The Department has already started considering the opportunities the audit has presented to evaluate, renew and re-focus the Department's programs and strategies to support improved student attendance into the future.

I would like to thank the Audit Office of NSW for their professionalism during the conduct of this performance audit, and for their collaborative approach to working with officers from the Department. The audit process has been beneficial and the report provides constructive feedback on the Department's practices. The Department appreciated the opportunity to meet regularly with your staff and provide feedback throughout the audit process.

Should you have any questions, you may contact Ms Trisha Ladogna, Director Behaviour and Student Participation, by telephone on   or email at

Yours sincerely

Georgina Harrisson
SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
20 September 2022
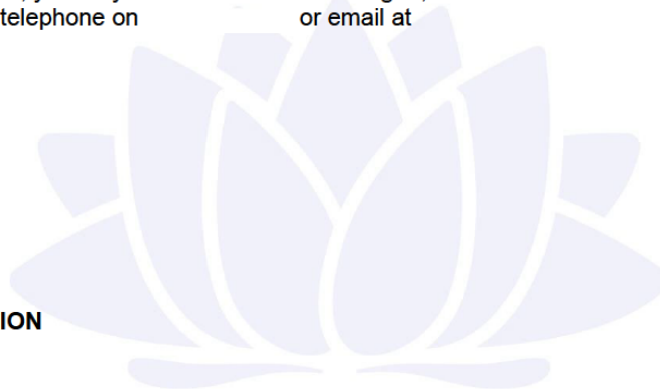
NSW Department of Education response to recommendations

Audit Recommendation	Department response	Comment
The Department of Education should:		
1. Publicly renew its commitment to improving student attendance beyond the end of Strategic Plan 2018–22 with new state-wide and school-level attendance targets	Accepted	The Department is currently reviewing system and school performance targets. Updated targets are anticipated to be implemented from 2024. As part of this work, the key learnings from current targets will be reviewed to ensure that the targets which are set drive the right support programs and behaviours in schools and lead to improved student outcomes.
2. Expand the use of supplementary targets for schools with complex student cohorts (e.g. reducing the proportion of students with attendance rates below 80%)	Accepted	The review of system and school targets (recommendation 1) and the gap analysis of attendance programs (recommendation 3) will investigate options for supplementary targets and the implications of this approach to meet student needs and deliver support programs.
3. Evaluate the Universal, Guided and Strategic attendance support resources and programs to assess impact, identify potential gaps and improve on existing resources	Accepted	Program evaluation is a key stage in programs which are delivered under the School Success Model. Universal resources to support attendance will be evaluated through a gap analysis on school needs, beyond procedures and systems, in understanding and responding to the reasons for non-attendance. Guided and Strategic Support programs will be reviewed and re-focussed as required to ensure services are available to and fit for purpose for the full range of schools most in need of attendance support.
4. Improve transparency by publicly reporting the attendance level measure for individual schools on the department's website and in school annual reports	Supported in principle	Attendance data at State and school scale is available on the Australian Curriculum Assessment & Reporting Authority (ACARA) MySchool website and at student level on some third party applications used by schools to communicate with parents. The Department will investigate the feasibility, including technical feasibility, of reporting on this measure in school annual reports. Section 18A of the Education Act places limitations on publishing comparative lists of school outcomes. Legal advice will be sought on the type of data which can be reported on the Department's website.

Audit Recommendation	Department response	Comment
5. Improve the analysis and reporting of attendance data to support targeted strategies and programs by: • improving the quality and timeliness of attendance data from third-party vendors • reviewing trends in attendance for priority equity cohorts • collecting better quality information on the reasons for absence	Accepted	The Department undertakes continuous improvement data and analysis projects, and maintains ongoing dialogue with third party providers regarding the ability of their systems to adapt to change. In responding to this recommendation, the Department will investigate solutions to improve the quality and timeliness of attendance data including any system constraints. This work will also support evaluation and delivery of other recommendations of the performance audit. The ability to analyse data by priority equity cohorts may be constrained by privacy and process limitations on the equity cohort status of some equity groups.
6. Finalise the attendance policy, procedure and codes review and develop resources to support schools in implementing the new settings	Accepted	Attendance policy, procedure and exemptions are in the process of being updated. While the performance audit did not make specific policy recommendations, this update will consider the overall findings of the audit for policy or procedural implications. The timing of delivery to schools of the updated attendance policy, procedure and any proposed modification to attendance codes will be scheduled in mid-2023, taking into account the schedule for delivery of other programs requiring school uptake and communications required to inform schools of updated content.
7. Review the approach to enforcing compulsory school attendance, including: • the adequacy and distribution of Home School Liaison Program resources • the appropriateness of reporting lines and links with other central support positions • program costs and long-term outcomes • the relative effectiveness compared to early intervention approaches	Accepted	The Department will undertake a review of the statutory and legal measures (pre-court and court) and related programs designed to achieve improved attendance in 2023 for anticipated implementation in 2024. This includes the distribution and adequacy of resources, systemic issues identified by the audit and effectiveness of each element in achieving improved attendance. The Department has commenced processes to address known system limitations that would allow objective comparative appraisal of the application and impacts of the full suite of attendance enforcement measures.

Audit Recommendation	Department response	Comment
By June 2023 the Department of Education should:		
8. Update its attendance strategies and programs based on the results of trial programs and provide commensurate resourcing to meet the revised student attendance targets	Accepted	Delivery of this recommendation will build on the first tranche of recommendations, in particular recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 7.
9. Review the current range of strategies and programs supporting attendance for Aboriginal students and address any gaps (e.g. strategies and programs for younger students) in consultation with relevant stakeholder groups.	Accepted	This recommendation presents an important opportunity for a comprehensive review of strategies and programs supporting attendance of Aboriginal students. The Department anticipates that additional time until the end of 2023 will be required to finalise this review. The review will be delivered with meaningful engagement and consultation with Aboriginal communities, other stakeholders including schools and staff as well as the Department's key partner, the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. It will consider: • review of current strategies and programs and research. • existing policies and agreements with external organisations and NSW government processes • programs/strategies for expansion, or potential new areas strategy/program development to address the gap in attendance rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. • existing and potential new providers and programs

Appendix two – About the audit

Audit objective

This audit assessed whether student attendance is effectively managed in government schools for students from Kindergarten to Year 10.

Audit criteria

We addressed the audit objective by assessing whether:

- there are effective systems and policies for managing student attendance
- the department effectively supports schools to manage student attendance
- schools are effectively managing student attendance.

Audit scope and focus

This audit examined attendance rates of students from Kindergarten to Year 10. The timeframe examines activities from 2018 to 2022 as data prior to 2018 is not directly comparable due to changes in data recording practices. The audit focused on the development and monitoring of policies, strategies and targets to improve student attendance.

Audit exclusions

The audit did not assess:

- student wellbeing initiatives
- student attendance in non-government schools, early childhood education or vocational education settings
- the effectiveness of partner agencies or relevant non-government organisations in relation to their role in supporting students with low attendance
- the merits of government policy objectives.

Audit approach

Our procedures included:

- interviewing:
  - relevant Department of Education staff
  - a selection of school principals
  - key stakeholder groups
- examining relevant data and documents, including policies, strategies, data reports, plans, guidelines, reviews and evaluations.

We used a judgemental sampling approach to select schools based on the following criteria:

- location (metropolitan Sydney, inner regional and outer regional New South Wales)
- school type (primary, secondary, central, school for specific purpose)
- background characteristics (low socio-economic background, high Aboriginal enrolment).

The audit approach was complemented by quality assurance processes within the Audit Office to ensure compliance with professional standards.

Audit methodology

Our performance audit methodology is designed to satisfy Australian Audit Standard ASAE 3500 Performance Engagements and other professional standards. The standards require the audit team to comply with relevant ethical requirements and plan and perform the audit to obtain reasonable assurance and draw a conclusion on the audit objective. Our processes have also been designed to comply with requirements specified in the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983.*

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the co-operation and assistance provided by the Department of Education. In particular, we would like to thank our liaison officers and staff who participated in interviews and provided evidence for the audit.

Audit cost

The estimated cost of this audit is $370,000.

Appendix three – Performance auditing

What are performance audits?

Performance audits determine whether state or local government entities carry out their activities effectively, and do so economically and efficiently and in compliance with all relevant laws.

The activities examined by a performance audit may include a government program, all or part of an audited entity, or more than one entity. They can also consider particular issues which affect the whole public sector and/or the whole local government sector. They cannot question the merits of government policy objectives.

The Auditor-General's mandate to undertake performance audits is set out in section 38B of the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983* for state government entities, and in section 421B of the *Local Government Act 1993* for local government entities.

Why do we conduct performance audits?

Performance audits provide independent assurance to the NSW Parliament and the public.

Through their recommendations, performance audits seek to improve the value for money the community receives from government services.

Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General who seeks input from parliamentarians, state and local government entities, other interested stakeholders and Audit Office research.

How are performance audits selected?

When selecting and scoping topics, we aim to choose topics that reflect the interests of parliament in holding the government to account. Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General based on our own research, suggestions from the public, and consultation with parliamentarians, agency heads and key government stakeholders. Our three-year performance audit program is published on the website and is reviewed annually to ensure it continues to address significant issues of interest to parliament, aligns with government priorities, and reflects contemporary thinking on public sector management. Our program is sufficiently flexible to allow us to respond readily to any emerging issues.

What happens during the phases of a performance audit?

Performance audits have three key phases: planning, fieldwork and report writing.

During the planning phase, the audit team develops an understanding of the audit topic and responsible entities and defines the objective and scope of the audit.

The planning phase also identifies the audit criteria. These are standards of performance against which the audited entity, program or activities are assessed. Criteria may be based on relevant legislation, internal policies and procedures, industry standards, best practice, government targets, benchmarks or published guidelines.

At the completion of fieldwork, the audit team meets with management representatives to discuss all significant matters arising out of the audit. Following this, a draft performance audit report is prepared.

The audit team then meets with management representatives to check that facts presented in the draft report are accurate and to seek input in developing practical recommendations on areas of improvement.

A final report is then provided to the head of the audited entity who is invited to formally respond to the report. The report presented to the NSW Parliament includes any response from the head of the audited entity. The relevant minister and the Treasurer are also provided with a copy of the final report. In performance audits that involve multiple entities, there may be responses from more than one audited entity or from a nominated coordinating entity.

Who checks to see if recommendations have been implemented?

After the report is presented to the NSW Parliament, it is usual for the entity's Audit and Risk Committee / Audit Risk and Improvement Committee to monitor progress with the implementation of recommendations.

In addition, it is the practice of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee to conduct reviews or hold inquiries into matters raised in performance audit reports. The reviews and inquiries are usually held 12 months after the report received by the NSW Parliament. These reports are available on the NSW Parliament website.

Who audits the auditors?

Our performance audits are subject to internal and external quality reviews against relevant Australian standards.

The Public Accounts Committee appoints an independent reviewer to report on compliance with auditing practices and standards every four years. The reviewer's report is presented to the NSW Parliament and available on its website.

Periodic peer reviews by other Audit Offices test our activities against relevant standards and better practice.

Each audit is subject to internal review prior to its release.

Who pays for performance audits?

No fee is charged to entities for performance audits. Our performance audit services are funded by the NSW Parliament.

Further information and copies of reports

For further information, including copies of performance audit reports and a list of audits currently in-progress, please see our website www.audit.nsw.gov.au or contact us on 9275 7100.

OUR VISION

Our insights inform and challenge government to improve outcomes for citizens.

OUR PURPOSE

To help Parliament hold government accountable for its use of public resources.

OUR VALUES

Pride in purpose

Curious and open-minded

Valuing people

Contagious integrity

Courage (even when it's uncomfortable)

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