Final Report:

Making Every Day Count: Effective strategies to improve student attendance in Queensland state schools

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Executive summary

The study

This project was commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) to determine what strategies are being used within Queensland government (state) schools to improve student attendance. In 2008, the Department's *Every Day Counts* initiative sought to improve student attendance at school through a shared commitment by students, parents, caregivers, schools and the community. Data from DET indicate that on any given day, nine per cent of Queensland state school students are absent from school. Through the *Every Day Counts* website, the initiative provides resources for schools, parents and the community to promote and support student attendance at school, every school day.

The driver behind this research was a report tabled in the Queensland Parliament in 2014, *Report No. 42: 'Review of state school attendance rates'*, by the former Education and Innovation (Parliamentary) Committee. This report identified the lack of high quality research on programs and practices in schools that enhanced attendance and reduced absenteeism. The report thus recommended:

> That the government explore options for an academically rigorous and independent research of the existing strategies being implemented in Queensland (and perhaps in Australia) to identify common features that lead to success in improving school attendance rates; and identify features or strategies that may work in particular environments or with particular groups (for example, strategies for chronic absentees, for younger children, for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, for Indigenous students).

In 2015, the Palaszczuk Government accepted all of the report's recommendations and this research constitutes part of the Government's response to that report.

Description of the study

The research was designed to develop an understanding of the positive strategies that schools with improved attendance data were utilising to achieve this outcome. The project was

conducted in three stages. The first stage of the project used DET data (including a survey of Queensland state school leaders and attendance patterns in all state schools in the State) that had identified 50 schools with improved student attendance. The second stage involved telephone interviews with the principals (or their representatives) from these 50 schools. The third stage involved 10 case studies of schools purposefully selected from the 50 principals' interviews on the basis of their unique or representative approaches to improving attendance, while ensuring a spread of primary, secondary and P-12 schools across the seven Queensland regions. The data collected through the various stages of the research have facilitated an overview of a way forward for Queensland state schools in their efforts to enhance attendance, with consideration given to the scalability of the various innovations.

Key findings

Queensland's attendance rate for Years 1 to 10 students in state schools in 2015 (91.6%) was in line with most other states and the Australian total (92.0%). Attendance level (low attendee proportion) and attendance rate were highly correlated in Queensland state schools. The analysis in this report suggests accumulative disadvantages for schools' attendance rates emanate from higher Indigenous proportions of student populations, lower Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD) scores of the area in which schools are situated, and being located in a Remote area. Attendance rates between 2013 and 2015 generally increased for primary as well as for secondary schools across all regions and remoteness categories.

Results from the 2015 Principals' Survey on School Attendance suggest that schools with lower attendance rates and schools with higher year levels were associated with a larger number of attendance strategies across many/most of the investigated dimensions. Their leaders were more likely to emphasise student voluntary absence than leaders of their respective opposites, and leaders of low attendance schools were also more likely to emphasise negative aspects in the realm of the family and household. By emphasising 'Family issues' and 'Parent apathy' (three out of four of the responding low attendance leaders selected these items among their top five reasons), school leaders of low attendance schools pointed to matters that may be seen as particularly outside the realm of schools' sphere of influence. However, leaders of low

attendance and secondary schools appeared to apply pluralistic approaches (those of improving, supporting as well as of controlling/punitive character) to responding to their lower attendance levels.

The principal interviews demonstrated the wide range of activities that schools were undertaking to improve levels of attendance. Within these interviews there was a strong focus on the factors beyond the school that contributed to low attendance. However, many of the schools within which these principals worked, there were significant efforts made to ameliorate the effects of these factors. Hence, for example, efforts were made to support students who came from high poverty backgrounds and to tackle issues related to transport problems. Many of the principals also, without lowering expectations, sought to be culturally sensitive. Across all of the interviews there were an array of different award structures put in place, often combined with a denial of privileges, such as the school formal and playing sport, for low attendance. A central feature of the interviews was the extent to which the principals worked with data and often ensured that the whole school was aware of how the school, and individual classes and students were tracking against targets. Many of these principals also stressed the importance of attending for learning, not just attending for awards and prizes. School culture and the creation of a positive learning environment also emerged as key factors for consideration.

The case study schools provided a more in-depth look at some of the strategies in operation. Here some of the tensions about implementation emerged in the schools. Operationalising many strategies required at different times deftness, supportiveness, assertiveness and creativeness on the part of school leadership teams. There also needed to be a willingness to listen as well as to act. The case studies illustrate the importance of school staff being consistent and committed to the strategies being implemented. They also indicated the importance of working closely with local communities. The strategies developed in the different schools were very context specific, thus very few strategies, could be replicated with the same effects. However, the case studies do provide indicators for the types of activity and strategies which work to support improved attendance.

Implications

The research conducted for this report indicates that schools need to adopt an approach to improving attendance that reflects three important criteria: consistent terminology; comprehensiveness; and a concern with high quality pedagogy and curriculum.

Due to the slippages in terminology related to attendance, it would be advisable for schools to pay careful attention to the terms and definitions that they use. Schools should use terminology and definitions that are acceptable to a wide range of audiences (e.g. parents, policy officers, academics) and to those who approach the issues from different perspectives (e.g. psychology, sociology, law, education). Clear definitions about what constitutes, say, an 'excused absence' require clarifying.

Effective approaches were also comprehensive enough to address the various factors that contribute to absenteeism: school, life and personal factors. This requires schools to have strategies that work closely with their data to understand their students' particular circumstances, to work at building bridges between school and home, addressing the various barriers that prevent some students from attending, individual case management, culturally appropriate practices, enhancing the quality of the school environment and the relationships with them, implementing awards and celebrations for high attendance, and appropriate sanctions for non-attendance.

As with the argument in the literature, the data in this report suggest that effective strategies are based on the assumption that every day at school must be made to count. There has to be an educational reason as to why it is critical for students to attend every day. This means that issues of pedagogy and curriculum have to be central to addressing issues of school attendance. The provision of a meaningful education is perhaps the most important contribution that schools can make to enhancing student attendance. Indeed, one principal in the study commented that 'classrooms need to be so stimulating that the students would not want to be anywhere else'.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This project has been commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) to determine what strategies are being used within Queensland state schools to improve student attendance. Absences from school have been a major concern of governments worldwide. In 2008, the Department's *Every Day Counts* initiative sought to improve student attendance at school through a shared commitment by students, parents, caregivers, schools and the community. Data from DET indicates that on any given day, nine per cent of Queensland state school students are absent from school. Through the *Every Day Counts* website, the initiative provides resources for schools, parents and the community to promote and support student attendance at school, every school day.

Queensland is, of course, not alone in Australian responses to improving attendance at school. All States and Territories have in place legislation outlining the responsibilities of parents and carers in relation to ensuring the children in their care attend school. In most cases, there are designated legal consequences for failing to have children attend school. In all jurisdictions, young people between the ages of six and 17 years of age are required to either be enrolled at a registered school, registered for home schooling, or participating in an eligible work or study option. As with Tasmanian policy (TAS Department of Education, 2015), parents of school-aged children are responsible for ensuring the enrolment of their child as required by law; ensuring that their child attends school each day; notifying the school of any absences; providing a medical certificate when requested by the Principal; and notifying the school in writing if the family is leaving to attend another school. Parents of young people in the required participation phase are similarly responsible for ensuring that the young person is enrolled in an appropriate education or training program; ensuring that their child meets attendance requirements; and notifying the program provider of any absences.

In Victoria, new legislation (VIC Department of Education & Training, 2016) regarding enrolment and attendance came into effect in March 2014. This legislation sought to promote and improve school attendance in Victoria, rather than punish unavoidable or reasonable absences. This legislation provided definitions and criteria by which levels of attendance could be judged. For example, absences are considered 'unexplained' if no explanation for the absence is provided to the school by parents/carers. In the event that no contact is made by parents/carers within 10 days, the absence will be recorded as unexplained. Attendance is considered poor if a student

reaches five days of unapproved or unexplained absence within a school year. At this point, further action may be taken at the discretion of the Principal, and may include appropriate supports or interventions. Genuine illness is considered a reasonable excuse; however, parents are expected to keep the school informed of the situation and to work with the school to develop a Student Absence Learning Plan.

New South Wales (NSW Learning and Engagement Directorate, 2015) policies exemplify the responsibilities of principals in regards to attendance that include providing clear information to students and parents; ensuring the school has effective measures in place to monitor and follow up student absences; and undertaking all reasonable measures to contact parents promptly. (An absence is unexplained if parents have failed to provide an explanation to the school within seven days). Principals are additionally responsible for maintaining attendance records; ensuring that learning and support needs of students are addressed; ensuring that frequent absences are explained; and developing strategies to ensure regular attendance at school. School staff must also be provided with information on attendance requirements and their obligation to monitor and promote regular attendance at school. Finally, principals must ensure that any child protection and well-being concerns are conveyed to the appropriate external agencies.

In most cases, as in Western Australia (WA Department of Education, 2016) and the Northern Territory (NT Department of Education, 2016), principals are required to manage student attendance, which includes: maintaining accurate records; responding to departmental requests for reporting and disclosure of these data; managing alternative attendance arrangements when appropriate; addressing student absences; and developing plans for persistent absence. In most instances, the implementation of the policy is considered to be the primary responsibility of the Principals. However, regional managers, or their equivalent, are deemed responsible for compliance monitoring and for interrogating individual school data. There is widespread recognition across Australian jurisdictions that a range of factors contribute to non-attendance and that those working in schools will employ a variety of strategies, for example: working with external agencies and building strong relationships with students, parents and the community.

As with Queensland's OneSchool, there are a number of staff and data management systems in place across Australia. These systems are designed to enable principals to manage schools' compliance with legislative requirements in regards to attendance: ensuring accurate and daily attendance records are maintained for all students enrolled in the school; ensuring appropriate local processes and support mechanisms are in place to optimise student attendance, address

non-attendance and re-engage students when required; and ensuring school staff have an understanding of, and actively apply, their department's policies and guidelines.

Across Australia, there are also a variety of alternative education programs for students. This includes, for example, South Australia's (SA Department for Education and Child Development, 2017) flexi learning options system designed to support those young people who have 'dropped out' of school. Whilst they are not directly related to enhancing attendance in mainstream schools, they do ensure that young people within a system are provided with an opportunity to attend a 'different' type of school. In Queensland, as elsewhere, some schools have adopted their own on-site alternative programs.

However, despite all jurisdictions demonstrating serious concerns about school absences, this report appears, after a significant search of the publically available work being done in various jurisdictions, to be the most comprehensive analysis of what is working in Australian schools to maximise attendance. The driver behind the research was a report tabled in the Queensland Parliament in 2014, *Report No. 42: 'Review of state school attendance rates'*, by the former Education and Innovation (Parliamentary) Committee. This report identified the lack of high quality research on programs and practices in schools that enhanced attendance and reduced absenteeism. The report thus recommended:

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In 2015, the Palaszczuk Government accepted all of the report's recommendations and this research constitutes part of the Government's response to that report.

1.2 The Research

A comprehensive review of existing literature was conducted, with particular attention paid to the ways in which terms related to attendance and absenteeism were being used, the consequences of absenteeism, causes of absenteeism, and research conducted on what is working to enhance attendance. The analyses of data for this project were undertaken in three stages. Stage 1 focused on a quantitative analysis of secondary data sets. Stage 2 entailed telephone interviews with

principals from schools identified by DET as having improved their attendance data or as having implemented creative strategies to enhance attendance. Stage 3 involved case studies of 10 schools, determined by an analysis of the 50 telephone interview transcripts.

1.2.1 Stage 1

The initial stage of the project reviewed publicly available and school-level secondary data sets already used by DET to identify 50 schools that had achieved improved student attendance. The quantitative component of the project drew on three distinct data sources: data on government schools in Australia compiled from the Reports of Government Services (ROGS); administrative data provided by DET on attendance patterns in all state schools in the State; and results of a survey of Queensland state school leaders from higher and lower attendance schools on strategies that improve attendance. The school-level data set was supplied by DET once ethical clearance had been obtained. This dataset provided school-level statistics, such as school-level annual attendance rates and the number of students attending schools each day, proportion of Indigenous students, and socioeconomic status quintile per school.

1.2.2 Stage 2

The second stage involved telephone interviews with 50 school principals (or their representatives) from schools selected by DET on the basis of their improved data. These interviews provide a broad overview of the positive strategies used by schools to improve student attendance. Analysis of these transcripts was primarily thematic; a method for encoding data through identifying patterns and themes within the interview responses. Some of these themes have been generated from the data, while others have been drawn from the review of the literature. The data are coded into the following categories: (a) Reasons for absenteeism; (b) Addressing conditions that prevent student attendance; (c) Making school an attractive place for students; and (d) Sanctions.

1.2.3 Stage 3

Out of the 50 schools interviewed, 10 were identified for the purposes of undertaking the case study component of the research by a panel of key investigators on the project. The 10 case study schools were purposefully selected on the basis of their unique or representative approaches to attendance, while ensuring a spread of primary, secondary and P-12 schools across the seven Queensland regions. The case study data were analysed with a view to determining commonalities across them as well as for identifying unique approaches. The case study data provide examples of what has worked to enhance attendance in particular schools. However, as with all case study

data, context has to be taken into account and simple replication is not always possible. The importance of the data from these schools is in the general principles they provide.

The data collected through the various stages of the research have facilitated the overview of a way forward for Queensland state schools in their efforts to enhance attendance that we present in the next chapter.

Chapter 2.   Literature Review

2.1   Introduction

This chapter begins with an outline of the ways in which the literature has been treating issues related to attendance at school, commencing with a discussion of the terms used within this work. This is followed by what the literature says about the consequences of low attendance, its causes and the types of approaches that have been used elsewhere to tackle the problem. The works presented here are not exhaustive. This is an issue that has been troubling educators in most countries in the Global North (which includes Australia) for many decades. However, the literature presented here, along with the research provides some indicators for a way forward for Queensland.

2.2   Definitions of absenteeism

Terminology around school attendance is problematic, and this is addressed in the conclusion. Whilst this report aims to discuss issues in relation to levels of attendance rather than utilising 'negative' terms such as 'absenteeism', much of the literature does use terms such as: absenteeism, truancy, school refusal, excused/unexcused absences, and involuntary/voluntary absences. These terms are used interchangeably within the literature. The word 'truancy' is frequently used within academic texts. However, it was rarely used by the school principals or teachers in the present study. One reason for this is that this term has a 'legal' interpretation which associates absenteeism with criminal behaviour. Hence, in the literature, as seen below, it tends to be in evidence when discussing crime. 'School refusal' tends to be associated with the psychological literature on attendance and is found in the psychology literature, and only rarely used by teachers and never by students and parents. In the concluding section of this literature review, it is argued that what is needed is a model that draws on common understandings of the terms which are acceptable to a wide range of audiences and perspectives. Hence, the terminology utilised within the review of the literature focuses on 'low attendance', and unexplained/explained or involuntary/voluntary absences where possible, except when referring to specific articles which utilise other terms.

Research conducted in relation to low attendance has tended to examine issues relating to individual students, their families or schools within various disciplines, including education, psychology, social/criminal justice, health sciences, leadership, ethics, law and psychiatry (Birioukov, 2016; Kearney, 2008). Kearney (2008) argues that '[a] key drawback of these divergent approaches to studying problematic absenteeism has been considerable dispersion among

researchers with respect to use and definition of key terminology' (p. 258). This has resulted in 'wide discrepancies in how schools define and catalogue absences, creating ambiguity in identifying absentees' (Birioukov, 2016, p. 345). Writing in the UK, Reid (2010, p. 2) argues that this is evidenced in 'statistics on non-attendance [which] are now quantified differently not only in the four UK administrations … but also in other parts of the world such as France, Portugal, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and different states within the United States'. Birioukov (2016) similarly observes that 'the lack of a clear and comprehensive definition of absenteeism is a troubling concern' (Birioukov, 2016, p. 341).

Absenteeism is generally defined in terms of 'excused or unexcused absences from school' (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, p. 257), with 'unexcused absences' often used interchangeably with 'truancy' within the literature (Birioukov, 2016). For example, Eaton, Brener, and Kann (2008) argue that '[i]f a student is absent without being excused by the parent or the school, the absence is unexcused and the student is truant' (p. 224). However, it has been argued that this simplistic definition not only fails to account for the many causes of absence (Reid, 2010), but 'is inadequate in appropriately addressing attendance related problems' (Birioukov, 2016, p. 341). Birioukov additionally argues that while this excused/unexcused dichotomy can serve as a tool to identify absentee students, it is not only largely incognisant of the complexity of absenteeism, but can be used to shift the blame for absenteeism onto students; effectively absolving wider society of any responsibility. At the same time, ambiguities can arise in terms of who has 'excused' the absence, the school or the parent/carer?

Drawing from the work of Driver and Watson (1989), and Steers and Rhodes (1978), Birioukov (2016) alternatively proposes utilising the concepts of 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' absenteeism as 'a more suitable framework for conceptualising absenteeism in academic research' (p. 341). Within this framework, voluntary absenteeism is defined in terms of students' motivation to attend school. For example, if the environment is experienced as hostile, or associated with failure students may 'choose' not to attend school. Involuntary absenteeism conversely refers to students' ability to attend school, which incorporates the life conditions which can often dictate young people's ability to attend school. This includes, for example, providing care for parents or siblings, supplementing the family income, or being taken on holidays which give the student no option but to miss school. The voluntary/involuntary framework does have a capacity to distinguish between students' ability to be present in school, and the absences which are often imposed on them, which are sometimes not taken into account in addressing low attendance.

2.3 Consequences of absenteeism

Research provides considerable evidence to suggest that while 'occasional school absenteeism is typically non-problematic … excessive absenteeism has been linked to serious problems' (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, p. 257) and the tendency to perpetuate a cycle of truancy into subsequent generations (Reid, 1999). These problems include achievement, school drop-out, involvement in the youth justice system, risky behaviours, and future life opportunities. They can also impact negatively upon others in the school community.

There is evidence to suggest that there is a strong relationship between achievement and attendance. For example, a Scottish national study found that 'pupils who truanted from school were regularly outperformed in terms of academic achievement at every level of schooling from primary to secondary … irrespective of natural ability as measured by IQ scores' (Reid, 2010, p. 2). Data provided by the Western Australian Department of Education between Semester 1, 2008 and Semester 2, 2012 similarly found that 'average academic achievement on NAPLAN tests declined with any absence from school and continued to decline as absence rates increased' (p. 34). Further, that 'unauthorised [or unexcused] absences had a significantly stronger association with achievement than authorized [or excused] absences' (p. 35).

Eventual 'school drop-out' has been linked to frequent absences. Such drop-out 'has been extensively studied in the literature as a correlate of negative life outcomes' (Rocque, Jennings, Piquero, Ozkan, & Farrington, 2016, p. 1), including 'economic deprivation, detachment from school-based health services, and social, occupational and marital problems in adulthood' (Kearney, 2008, p. 258).

There has also been an association with low school attendance and involvement with the youth justice system. Rocque et al. (2016) observe that '[t]ruancy was widely studied as a correlate of crime in the early to mid-20th century [with] classic work by Shaw and McKay (1942), Glueck and Glueck (1950), and Reiss (1951) [all finding] associations between truancy and delinquency' (p. 2). However, they note that this topic has not been the focus of recent research, with few studies examining the relationship between truancy and involvement in the criminal justice system. Of these more recent studies, some have found that school drop-out is a predictor of later criminal behaviours, while others have discredited this relationship. On this basis, Rocque et al. (2016) suggest that it may be 'the precursors of dropping out that matter' (p. 2) and impact upon students' life chances. Further, that truancy is only one indicator of disengagement from

schooling, and that this disengagement is more likely to be correlated with non-violent crime, rather than school drop-out *per se*.

This is supported by other research which confirms that 'the link between truancy and crime has been established for over 100 years … [with] communities with high levels of truancy … more likely to have correspondingly high rates of daytime criminal activity' (Reid, 2010, p. 3). Rocque et al. (2016) though argue that truancy, in and of itself, may not lead directly to crime, as multiple individual and environmental risk factors such as gender, low school achievement, poor parental guidance and low socio-economic status may increase the risk of involvement in crime. However, their longitudinal study of British males born in the 1960s and 1970s confirmed the existence of 'unfortunate relationships between early life truancy and many critical life domains in adulthood' (p. 16).

The link between absenteeism and participation in risky behaviours such as alcohol, tobacco and drug use, risky sexual behaviours, violence and eating disorders, which were documented during the 1970s, have persisted into more recent years (Eaton et al., 2008). For example, Smith (2004) found that 'truants were more likely to smoke, drink and use illegal drugs than non-truanting pupils' (Reid, 2010, p. 3), and Rocque et al. (2016) found a link between truancy and problem drinking as well as non-violent crime. This was supported by the work of Eaton et al. (2008) who found that 'students who were absent without permission were more likely to engage in behaviours related to unintentional injuries and violence, tobacco use, drug use, and unhealthy behaviours to lose or avoid gaining weight (i.e., fasting, taking diet pills and using laxatives)' (p. 226). Identifying school, peer, individual and family related variables, Henry and Huizinga (2007) also found that 'an observed relationship between truancy and onset of drug use could be spurious if some third variable(s) cause both truancy and onset of drug use' (p. 358).

Given the direct correlation between educational qualifications and opportunities for employment, absenteeism has significant implications for individuals' life opportunities, in addition to the wider societal cost of poor academic achievement for a substantial portion of the population. However, '[w]hile most harm is done to the truants, their behaviour often has adverse consequences for others … returning truants, for example, often disrupt the learning of other pupils' (Reid, 2010, p. 3). This is supported by Wilson, Malcolm, Edward, and Davidson (2008), who found that persistent absence also impacts on regularly attending students. These students reported experiencing a wide range of emotions from disdain to sympathy and from sadness to anger, with irritation being most predominantly reported. Many regular attenders also

reported distancing themselves from truanting students, who they judged as being unlikely to achieve. According to Wilson et al. (2008), 'truants' were typically deemed to be 'the thickos … it's their own fault if they don't get a good education'. Some students additionally associated truants with troublemakers, and accordingly reported that school was better when the truants were absent; a view which was also shared by some teachers. These teachers argued, that any absence, whether voluntary or involuntary, could affect regularly attending students in a number of adverse ways. For example, resentment among students who were good attenders, with disruptive absentees apparently going unpunished for their behaviour, or avoiding their work by copying others' notes. Other regular attenders additionally expressed bitterness that good attenders could be penalised for others' absences, through missing 'fun days' which only occurred with 100% attendance, in addition to the disruptions to their learning that were caused by the need for teachers to help returning absentees to catch up.

Wilson et al. (2008) also found that teachers were affected by both voluntary and involuntary absences. These teachers reported resenting the time spent helping absentees catch up, with one teacher expressing frustration at the ineffectuality of repeatedly backtracking with the same children, while others worried that regular attenders could emulate truant behaviours. In addition, they perceived poor attenders to be more demanding than regular attenders and 'never get into the same way of behaving as everybody else' (p. 12), while one teacher reported that it was difficult for teachers to establish a secure and trusting relationship with children who are frequently absent. Some teachers additionally expressed concerns that poor standardised test results could reflect badly on them and the schools' reputations.

2.4 Causes of absenteeism

The causes of absenteeism from school are varied. Historically, students have been held responsible for their own absences from school or their parents/carers have been blamed for lacking the willingness to ensure their children attend school regularly. However, as Gase, DeFosset, Perry, and Kuo (2016) indicate, when talking with young people it is the school, curriculum, pedagogy and teachers that are most often blamed. Thus as Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, and Dalicandro (1998, p. 637) state, 'Truancy is a complex phenomenon involving the joint effects of multiple factors' (see also Marvul, 2012; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). As described previously, Birioukov (2016) argues that the best way in which to understand absenteeism is through a 'voluntary/involuntary framework'. Such a framework involves considering 'variables from multiple domains' (Corville-Smith et al., 1998, p. 630). For example, it could be argued that a

student who is taken on holidays by parents is absent 'involuntarily' whilst someone who is spending time at the local shopping centre with friends to avoid particular classes is 'voluntarily' absent. This framework brings into focus a range of factors associated with schools as well as parents/carers and the young people themselves. As Zubrick (2014, p. 35) has indicated, 'school engagement issues' also underpin 'unauthorised absences' from school.

There is thus some difficulty in trying to identify which factors can be attributed as the cause of a particular student's absenteeism as there are often multi-causal and interlinked factors. Hence, strategies or studies that only focus on one aspect imply that difficulty in only one area is the main cause of a student's absenteeism (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). As a result, these issues tend to be examined in isolation, rather than exploring the transactional interplay that is inherent within and between the multiple factors (Birioukov, 2016). From this perspective, the broad categories of 'school', 'life' and 'personal circumstances' were developed from the literature.

2.5 School as a contributor to absenteeism

2.5.1 Relationships

Kearney (2008, p. 261) argues that 'a comprehensive model of problematic absenteeism must consider school-related factors that help create aversive learning environments and parent and student disengagement'. This concern is of course not new, schools have long been implicated in contributing to students' absences from school (see for example Billington, 1978; Eaton & Houghton, 1974; Estcourt et al., 1986). This can involve schools being seen by parents and students, for example, as judgmental, unsympathetic to personal circumstances and failing to protect students from bullying (Reid, 2010). The more negative and more sustained the criticism of student behaviours, it is argued, the more likely it is that resentment towards the school will be developed by parents and students (Eastman, Cooney, O'Connor, & Small, 2007). At times, 'this can bring parents and schools into conflict' (Reid, 2010) which damages the relationship between parents and schools that is essential to ensuring regular attendance. The literature suggests that strong bonds between schools, and students and their families are critical to improving school attendance (Eaton et al., 2008, p. 224). There is also some evidence that the bonds students and parents develop with primary schools is often difficult to maintain in the transition to high school (Corville-Smith et al., 1998).

Hostile student-teacher relationships can also cause absenteeism. This may arise from punitive behavioural management practices, students having a sense of experiencing an injustice, or of not being treated fairly, and personality clashes with particular teachers. Such behaviours can cause

not only frequent absences from school, but also a complete disengagement from school (Mills & McGregor, 2014). Hence, students' frustration at what they perceive to be an unfair and coercive schooling system that renders them powerless may be reflected in students' rejection of the system and the values it purports to uphold (see also Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden, Mitchell, & Munns, 2009; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008).

2.5.2 School climate, including student agency

School climate is closely tied to relationships in schools. When surveying students about school climate, which includes student connectedness with school, engagement in school activities and perceptions of safety (see for example, Chen & Weikart, 2008), Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, and Lindstrom Johnson (2017) found that students who reported 'moderate' and 'negative' school climates attended schools with higher rates of chronic absenteeism.

School climate is severely affected by all forms of bullying and discrimination. Evidence suggests that bullying in all its forms is increasingly becoming a cause of non-attendance and truancy (Elliott, 1999; Reid, 2010), with both within and out of school bullying (including cyber bullying) increasingly related to non-attendance (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; K. Reid, 2008; Stone & Stone, 2011). However, while there is evidence to suggest that bullying is becoming a justification for non-attendance, there is no major study of the link between bullying and truancy, and as such, this link is still not fully understood (Reid, 2010). That being said, there is a wealth of literature demonstrating that discrimination (and violence) based on gender (including sexuality) and race has a significant impact on attendance (Archer, 2003; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2013; Kane, 2011; Keddie, 2017; Mills, 2001).

2.5.3 Classroom practices

Closely linked with school climate, are students' experiences in classrooms, which also contribute to school attendance. For example, increased academic demands, especially in the transition from primary to high school, in combination with some students' perception of an irrelevant curriculum that does not stimulate interest or seems unlikely to be of future benefit have both been seen as factors contributing to absenteeism (Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Elliott, 1999). In England and Wales, the National Curriculum has been the source of much criticism in this regard. Reid (2010, p. 9) has stated: 'Recent studies [in those countries] have suggested that many disaffected pupils have become disenchanted with the content and repetitive nature of the National Curriculum in England and Wales'. In their work with young people who have left the mainstream education sector for 'flexi schools' in Queensland, and elsewhere in Australia, Mills and McGregor (2014)

found that a curriculum and pedagogical practices that did not speak to students, along with lack of individual attention, were major factors in their decision to leave the mainstream.

2.6 Life circumstances

2.6.1 Socioeconomic status

While it is important not to stereotype particular groups of people, it has to be recognised that some families face a particular set of life circumstances which contribute to low attendance. For example, poverty is a clear factor associated with absenteeism and disengagement from schooling (Kearney, 2008; Marvul, 2012; Zhang, 2004). However, as Reid (2012, p. 212) has noted, care needs to be taken in that 'the vast majority of pupils from these backgrounds attend school normally and regularly so at best, this is only one factor'. Where poverty can be a factor is in terms of a lack of transportation to school and inadequate access to resources (Gottfried, 2009; Ham, 2004; Marvul, 2012). It can also mean, especially for older students, extra work commitments to supplement the family income, or an unstable home life due to uncertain employment opportunities for family members (Skattebol et al., 2014). Homelessness can also impact upon a young person's ability to attend school (Kearney, 2008; McGregor, Mills, Baroutsis, & Hayes, 2017; Mills & McGregor, 2014). It has also been argued that the types of employment available to families or parental anxieties associated with poverty can also 'result in poor adult supervision, high rates of child self-care and lack of responsiveness to truancy' (Kearney, 2008, p. 260).

2.6.2 Cultural factors

Cultural factors, sometimes associated with low income/high poverty backgrounds, may also play a role in student absenteeism. For example, high levels of poverty in some Aboriginal communities are exacerbated by levels of what some would refer to as 'institutional racism' (Gillborn, 2008). Some other cultural factors contributing to low attendance occur through mismatches between home and school ways of seeing the world. For example, Aboriginal young people may miss school due to ceremonies of cultural significance, and new immigrants may have different understandings of school, school attendance and its significance in Western culture (Birioukov, 2016).

2.6.3 Family relationships

It is not only students from poorer backgrounds whose social circumstances impact significantly on attendance. Families from all backgrounds can experience severe disruption or dysfunction. Young people in such homes face numerous stresses which affect their willingness to attend school. Hence, students who are chronic absentees are, according to Corville-Smith et al. (1998), often

living in 'unhealthy family relationships'. Kearney (2008) notes that family chaos, marked by high rates of divorce, separation, child maltreatment, conflict and foster care, is also a factor in the lives of chronic absentees. Parental alcohol and/or substance abuse can also contribute to this chaos (Kearney, 2008).

2.6.4 Parenting responsibilities

Becoming a parent, usually a mother, whilst still at school presents numerous barriers to completing schooling. Whilst many young mothers do seek to try and stay in school, they find it increasingly difficult to continue, especially if they do not have much support from other family members or the child's father (McGregor et al., 2017; Mills & McGregor, 2014). Hence, teenage mothers typically complete fewer years of schooling than their peers (Hofferth, Reid, & Mott, 2001; Kearney, 2008).

2.6.5 Gender

Whilst it has been boys who have been most associated with truancy, or voluntary absenteeism, with the exception of pregnant and mothering young women, there have been some changes over the last 40 years according to Reid (2012). There is also some evidence to suggest that girls' engagement with school is more negatively affected by family breakdown (Ham, 2004). However, boys still constitute the major group of high level absentees, and there are clearly some issues related to masculinity which impact upon boys' absenteeism, especially in the romanticised aspects of 'wagging' (Darmody, Smyth, & McCoy, 2008; Lingard, Martino, & Mills, 2009).

2.7 Personal Circumstances

2.7.1 Academic achievement

Young people who are persistently absent are often those who are not achieving well academically. Reid (2012, p. 335) notes, for example, that research in the UK has demonstrated that: 'Truants tend to emanate from those with low literacy scores for their numerical ages'. This of course begs the question: does the absenteeism cause the low achievement or does the low achievement cause absenteeism? However, as he stresses, this means that early intervention strategies are needed for both learning needs and for absenteeism.

2.7.2 Academic self-concept

Perhaps not surprisingly, Corville-Smith et al. (1998) found that absentee students had lower self-esteem and academic self-concepts than other students who attended regularly. The idea that students need positive self-esteem in order to succeed academically is not new. Over 60 years ago

Lecky (1945) pointed out that students' level of achievement might be related to the perceptions they had of themselves as learners (see Hamachek, 1995). It has been claimed that an emphasis on developing 'self-esteem' has inhibited the development of students' resilience to overcoming challenges and frustrations (see for example Benard, 2004; Breslin, 2005; Kersey & Robertson, 2005). However, as Reid (2012), with over 40 years' experience working in the field, has argued, 'for many pupils, their truancy is a psychological plea for help'. He suggests that regimes based on punishment, especially when combined with academic 'failure' compound the problem they are seeking to solve: absenteeism.

2.7.3 Psychological factors

Kearney (2008, p. 259) identified a range of psychological diagnoses associated with absenteeism. These include 'school phobia', 'separation anxiety', 'school refusal' and 'school refusal behaviour'. Underpinning these terms are a number of symptoms displayed by the young person suffering from experiencing one of these diagnoses, such as anxiety, depression, fear, perfectionism, loneliness, and 'manipulativeness'. Personality traits associated with these symptoms are said to include introversion and low openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability. Whilst these various diagnoses contribute to young people's disconnection to school, they are also associated with learning disabilities and poor relationships with peers (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Spencer, 2009). While these issues cannot be assumed to be exclusive to students residing in low SES communities, there is evidence to suggest that they are more often diagnosed in these communities (Birioukov, 2016).

2.8 Addressing absenteeism

Kearney (2008, p. 261) has argued that approaches to absenteeism 'have been greatly influenced by social/criminal justice (truancy) and psychological (school refusal) perspectives'. In the first instance, punitive measures have been put in place, in the latter there has been greater attention paid to counselling and alternative approaches to education. However, as Kearney has stated it is very difficult for schools to differentiate between the two, and thus 'considerable overlap occurs … with respect to symptomatology, diagnosis, severity of nonattendance, and school-related factors that contribute to non-attendance (p. 262). In the following section, some of the approaches by schools and governments to address low attendance in schools are foregrounded.

2.8.1 Community - school partnerships

There is evidence to suggest that some students do not attend school for fear of bullying, or racially or gender based violence causing some schools to make this a key concern in their

approaches to improving attendance (see above). Thus some schools have taken on board various conflict resolution practices, such as restorative justice (Bintliff, 2016), greater vigilance around security issues and entering into partnerships with the police, such as school-based police officers.

In some cases, there have been significant efforts to establish better relationships with students' families (Stone & Stone, 2011). The creation of these relationships has served to enhance the possibilities for reducing misunderstandings, for addressing specific students' needs and for ensuring that parents/carers stay connected to the school and see staff as approachable. These relationships developed through outreach activities and home visits as well as encouraging parents to visit the school for classroom and extra curricula activities have been highly valued (Kearney, 2008). However, Reid (2010, p. 6) has noted that: 'Some schools need better advice and support on how best to work in partnership with parents and carers – in particular on finding appropriate ways to best engage parents who are less confident in engaging with schools. One key way in which some schools have engaged with parents is in providing them with parenting support or parental training (Kearney, 2008). Reid, (2010, p. 6) has argued that 'evidence-based parenting programs should be available to all parents and carers who request help, especially for those with younger-age children'. Increasing parent involvement in addition to enhancing attendance is also likely to support students' academic progress, the monitoring of homework, and greater engagement in parent-teacher associations (Kearney, 2008).

2.8.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Working closely with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has also been shown to be advantageous for keeping young people from Indigenous backgrounds in school. Baxter and Meyers (2016) report on a Victorian primary school that employed strategies over a 10-year period to increase the attendance of Indigenous students. Many of these strategies also supported those students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, for example, a breakfast program and a parent room with computers, Internet access, magazines and refreshments, and transport to and from school if needed. The strategies specifically for the school's Indigenous population included employing an Indigenous staff member – Koorie Education Worker – to work closely with Indigenous parents, culture days and a play group for pre-school-aged children. The result of this was an increased number of Indigenous students enrolling in the school. However, there was also an overall increase in enrolment and attendance of all students in the school, ironically meaning that the gap in attendance between non-Indigenous and Indigenous did not change dramatically.

2.8.3 Monitoring data

A key feature of approaches to addressing attendance issues is monitoring student attendance data. Zubrick (2014, p. 33) says on school attendance that it: 'is of substantive concern to schools, with many Australian school jurisdictions implementing programs to monitor, report and address non-attendance'. This was the case in this study of Queensland state schools.

2.8.4 Addressing conditions that work against attendance

Addressing the conditions that work against attendance include psychological interventions, which 'concentrate primarily on child symptoms, immediate proximal factors, and circumscribed intervention' (Kearney, 2008, p. 258) and those which are said to 'clear the path for learning' (McGregor et al., 2017). In the first instance, these involve trying to 'treat' behaviours such as anxiety with various strategies, for example, cognitive therapy, or antidepressant medications. The latter approach has tried to accommodate or ease the difficulties young people face as the result of homelessness, poverty or parenthood (Mills & McGregor, 2014).

2.8.5 Making students want to come to school

Although parents bear most of the responsibility and decision making for ensuring that their children attend school during the primary phase, there is evidence to suggest that students in secondary schooling make sophisticated decisions about whether to attend school or not (Reid, 2010). Indeed, McIntyre-Bhatty (2008, p. 375) has suggested that truancy could be 'considered as a rational enactment of dissatisfaction' with school. Hence, attention to school climate, curriculum and pedagogy are required.

Creating a school climate where students feel safe, respected and valued appears to be critical to making students want to come to school. While leadership here is clearly important, so too are the presence of empathetic teachers (DeSocio et al., 2007). Curricula and pedagogical practices that match the needs and interests of students, without reducing the intellectual rigour of the curriculum, are required to keep students engaged once they are at school are also very important (McGregor et al., 2017). It has also been argued that flexibility in terms of schedules and courses also keeps young people, especially those most vulnerable to absenteeism, engaged (Kearney, 2008; Mills & McGregor, 2014; Reid, 2007).

2.8.6 Alternative Education

In Australia, as elsewhere, there is a growing reliance on alternative provision to address chronic absenteeism (DeSocio et al., 2007; McGregor et al., 2017; Tate & Greatbatch, 2017). Such

provision can be problematic in that students become stigmatised, may not receive a challenging curriculum and/or find further education pathways are closed down for them at an early age. At the same time some of these sites point to the ways in which an environment that reflects a 'full-service' model of schooling can address (often through advice or referral) students' accommodation, financial, legal or family needs, and can provide a tailored curriculum to meet individual needs (see for example, Dryfoos, 1998; Dyson, 2001).

2.8.7 Special programs

Some schools introduce special programs to keep 'at risk' students engaged. Marvul (2012) describes a small United States (US) program trialled, albeit in a small alternative high school that was successful in keeping minority and disadvantaged male students who had been chronic absentees in their previous school attending school. The program was sport focused and included 'moral education'. The approach included daily calls to parents in order to keep parents informed of attendance, organizing classes that addressed moral issues such as universal rights in relation to different cultures, approaches to leadership and everyday moral dilemmas, and organizing regular football and basketball games with teams from other locations.

2.8.8 Listening to students

Increasingly, schools and school systems around the world, have been taking the question of student voice seriously (Raby, 2014; Robinson, 2011; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Robinson, 2009). This could be extended to working on ways to improve attendance. Reid (2010, p. 7) has argued that there 'is a case for involving more children and young people in dialogue about truancy and its solution'.

2.8.9 Rewards

Many schools have adopted reward systems to encourage attendance. Whilst this was largely the case in the present study, and many were done good humouredly in ways that enhanced the school climate, such approaches have not been implemented without critique. For example, Arthurs, Patterson, and Bentley (2014, p. 865) stated that: 'the use of incentives to lure a student into school belittles the role of a school and its purpose as a place of learning with the consequence that the key attraction becomes whatever the incentive is at the time … community distrust of the school, which is only reinforced by the proposal to bribe a student and their family'.

2.8.10 Interagency supports

There has been evidence that links full-service schooling with improved attendance for young people experiencing difficult out-of-school factors (Dryfoos, 1998; Dyson, 2001). There has also been some evidence of programs linked to law enforcement agencies working with schools to reduce absenteeism being successful (see for example, Bazemore, Stinchcomb, & Leip, 2004), including in Queensland (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett, & Eggins, 2017). In the Mazerolle et al. (2017) study, conferencing practices were utilised to work with parents to explore the consequences, including the legal ones, of students not attending school.

2.8.11 Legal sanctions by governments

In addition to the approaches taken by schools, and often supported by education departments, there have also been attempts to address attendance through legislation. The literature identifies a range of punitive measures to ensure parental and student compliance with attendance requirements. Dickson and Hutchinson (2010) singled out Queensland 'truancy' laws, updated in 2006 as part of the new *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (Qld) ('Education Act') as an example of punitive measures. They noted that 'penalties were doubled for parents who did not meet their obligations to see that their children attended school. The maximum penalty available for a truancy offence is now $1200' (2010, p.88). In the United Kingdom and the US there are also sanctions that operate against parents. However, Reid (2010, p. 11) has noted that: 'The application of the law on school attendance in the United Kingdom has never worked very effectively' (see also Zhang, 2003; Zhang, 2004). The same could be said to be the case in the United States (Eastman et al., 2007).

It has been argued that such approaches, except perhaps in the case of parents taking their children on holidays in term time, for example, are rarely successful. As studies in the United States and in the United Kingdom have indicated many parents are unable to control whether or not their children attend or stay at school, especially older young people (Eastman et al., 2007; Reid 2010). Indeed, Reid (2010, p. 11) has claimed: 'Many professionals in the United Kingdom now consider the laws on school attendance to be antiquated'; being dominated by the 1870, 1944, 1995 and 1996 Education Acts'. Dickson & Hutchinson (2010, pp. 93) say of Queensland, albeit in 2010:

> … truancy seems to have increased in Queensland since the penalties under the Education Act were doubled in 2006. One reason for this disconnect must be that the laws allowing prosecutions are only rarely implemented. This suggests that they create a regime

designed to deter as much as punish. This suggests, also, that there is a residual reluctance to prosecute parents … Underpinning the reluctance to prosecute, perhaps, is an intuition that to do so is a flawed solution to truancy … rhetoric designed to respond to the popular perception that governments need to 'get tough on truancy' … there are potential problems with punishing parents in order to benefit children … truancy laws penalize parents … built on an assumption that parental failure is the cause of truancy.

The same can be said of approaches that have sought to withhold welfare payments from parents of young people truanting. A large study in the Northern Territory indicated that the introduction of the measure caused some improvement in the first instance, but that levels quickly fell back to their original levels soon thereafter (Justman & Peyton, 2014).

The criminalizing of truancy, with police detainment of absentee youths and court proceedings or imprisonment for parents of truants (Bazemore et al., 2004; Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005) is highly contentious. In some US jurisdictions, for example, young people can themselves be prosecuted. However, Birioukov (2016) argues that 'the heavy-handed approach of criminalizing truancy does not appear to have had positive results, with evidence suggesting that many prosecuted truants displayed higher absence rates following the court proceedings' (p. 345).

2.9 Conclusion

There is no doubt that ensuring high attendance levels for all students is of the utmost importance. Significant evidence exists to suggest that in order to 'cumulatively build knowledge, skills, intellectual capacity and academic success … requires regular school attendance' (Baxter & Meyers, 2016, p. 212). However, Zubrick (2014) argues that while the benefits of improving poor attendance are evident, they are not as prominent as might be hoped; suggesting that the point of entry to schooling provides the best opportunity to establish a long-term, sustainable approach to attendance. This finding is supported by the earlier work of Corville-Smith et al. (1998), who argued that attendance issues which arise in elementary, or primary education, are often exacerbated during the secondary schooling years. However, attendance alone will not solve educational inequities. It must be noted that while there is a clear relationship between attendance and academic achievement, 'these effects are modest when compared with the impact of … the combination of [low socioeconomic index] and poor attendance rates, with higher proportions of unexplained absences … particularly damaging to achievement' (Zubrick, 2014, p. 37).

Tackling low attendance, therefore, requires solutions that develop recognition of the two worlds of schooling and home that impact upon young people's willingness and ability to attend school. As Cimmarusti, James, Simpson, and Wright (1984) stated many years ago: 'Although the family and school are two separate systems, the child serves as a link between the two and, therefore, a problem in one is 'likely to be felt in the other through the child''. Consequently, many researchers (see for example Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Corville-Smith et al., 1998) have argued that given factors within the child, the child's family and the school are interrelated, and a solution that targets a single area for treatment is unlikely to be effective (Bell et al., 1994). Success at addressing this problem is thus most likely if parents, students, and school personnel share the task of identifying and addressing the problem (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). There is evidence to suggest that there is a need to acquire a better understanding of the young person's perception of the problem – as this would help to generate a better understanding of the contribution that an interplay of the self, family and school makes to absenteeism (Gase et al., 2016). There is evidence to suggest that the school should be taking the lead on addressing the issue, as Corville-Smith et al. (1998) noted student dissatisfaction with school was the most important single variable marking a difference between attenders and non-attenders (see also Gase et al., 2016).

The myriad factors that contribute to low attendance indicate, as claimed by McIntyre-Bhatty (2008, p. 380) 'there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to truancy prevention'. This echoes Reid (2010, p. 12) who has argued that: 'To date, there has been no single solution of panacea to resolve truancy, despite much good professional practice and effort'. However, as outlined in the review of the literature above, there are numerous approaches which do make *a difference* if not *the difference*. Hence, the complexity of the issues involved in contributing to low attendance and the multiple responses employed to address suggests an interdisciplinary approach as suggested by Kearney (2008). For Kearney, processes that address what he calls 'problematic absenteeism' must:

> 1) include terminology and definitions acceptable to a wide range of audiences (e.g., academics, practitioners, policy officers, parents) and those who approach the issues from different perspectives (e.g. psychology, sociology, law, education);
>
> 2) be comprehensive enough to address the various factors that contribute to absenteeism;

These criteria align with the findings from the literature review and the following research data collected from the Department, from school principals and from the case studies. However, it is equally clear that to ensure high attendance school has to be made meaningful; every day must be made to count.

Chapter 3.　　　Attendance in Queensland State Schools

3.1　Introduction

This chapter documents quantitative analysis undertaken as a part of the 'School Attendance in Queensland State Schools Project' for the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET). There are two main aims for the quantitative component of the project:

(1) to provide background for the qualitative component of the project; and

(2) to assist in selecting case studies for detailed qualitative analysis.

The quantitative component on the project draws on three distinct data sources:

i.　　　Data on government schools in Australia compiled from the Reports of Government Services (ROGS);

ii.　　Administrative data provided by the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) on attendance patterns in all state schools in the State; and

iii.　　Data from a survey of school leaders on strategies that improve attendance.

Section 3.2 uses the ROGS data to investigate Queensland's school attendance in the broader Australian context; Section 3.3 provides a more detailed analysis of attendance data for Queensland based on the school-level administrative data provided by DET; Section 3.4 investigates the characteristics of 50 schools selected to participate in the qualitative component of the attendance project, to aid the selection of a smaller number of case studies for detailed analysis. Results from the survey of school leaders are reported in Chapter 4.

3.2　School attendance – Queensland in Australian context

This section draws on data reported in the Reports of Government Services (ROGS) to investigate Queensland's school attendance in comparison with other states and territories. ROGS considers variations in attendance by Indigenous status, remoteness and year level and these are the characteristics covered in this section. It is important to note that this analysis is constrained by the parameters and limitations of the data source and some methodological caveats need to be made. Specifically, the reporting on school attendance across Australian jurisdictions has been affected by methodological and administrative differences in collecting and managing relevant information, which have limited the comparability of attendance data across jurisdictions and over time. Because of that, the material presented here exclusively relates to the year 2015, which

offers the greatest comparability across jurisdictions. The remaining limitations in comparability are mentioned under the graphs presented.

3.2.1 Attendance rate and attendance level

The attendance rate[1] is a measure commonly used to quantify attendance in Australian schools. It expresses the number of days students *actually* attended school as a proportion of all days that students *could* have attended school.

Queensland's attendance rate for state schools in 2015 was 91.6%, which was in line with most other jurisdictions and the Australian rate (Figure 1). The Northern Territory (NT) had by far the lowest attendance rate, which was 10 percentage points below the Queensland rate in 2015.

Figure 1 Attendance rates by jurisdiction, all students, Year 1-10, government schools 2015
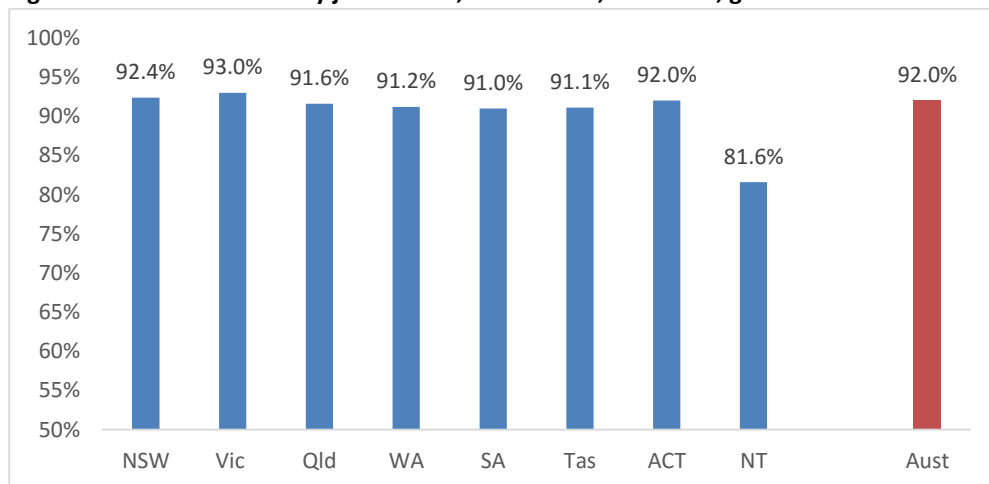
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.131.
NSW data was not collected on a comparable basis with other states and territories.

Attendance rates for government schools decreased from Years 7 to 10 (ROGS 2016, 4.15), which is illustrated for Queensland and Australian Government schools in Figure 2. The graph also indicates that Queensland's attendance rate for Years 1 to 7 was slightly below the Australian rate. It needs to be noted that NSW data was not collected on a comparable basis with other states and territories. As NSW data feeds into the Australian rate, the latter may be somewhat influenced by the inconsistency.

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[1] Attendance rates presented in this section are defined as the number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students in Years 1 to 10, as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended over the period.

Figure 2 Attendance rates by year level, all students, government schools, Queensland and Australia 2015
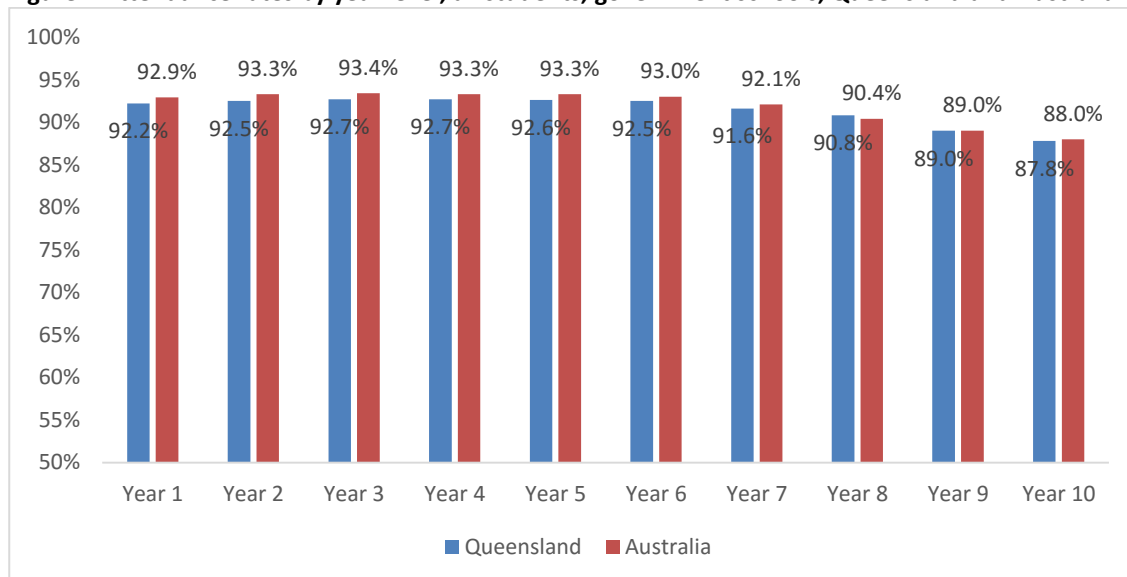
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.131.

The attendance rate is a standardised measure of the collective days that a student population was absent for. However, the same attendance rate could be generated by different non-attendance patterns in a student population. For example, the same non-attendance rate could be driven by a small group of students who are regularly absent or a larger group of students who are occasionally absent. A measure of attendance that is useful in this context is called the attendance level[2]. The attendance level in ROGS describes the proportion of students with an attendance rate of 90% or higher.

In Queensland state schools, nearly three in four students fell into this category, which was similar to some other jurisdictions and the national total (that excludes NSW) (Figure 3). Again, the result for the NT was far below that of the other jurisdictions. Only about one in two students in the NT attended school at least nine out of ten possible days.

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[2] The attendance level presented in this document is defined as the proportion of full-time students in Years 1-10 whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90 per cent over the period.

Figure 3 Attendance level by jurisdictions, all students, Year 1-10, government schools 2015
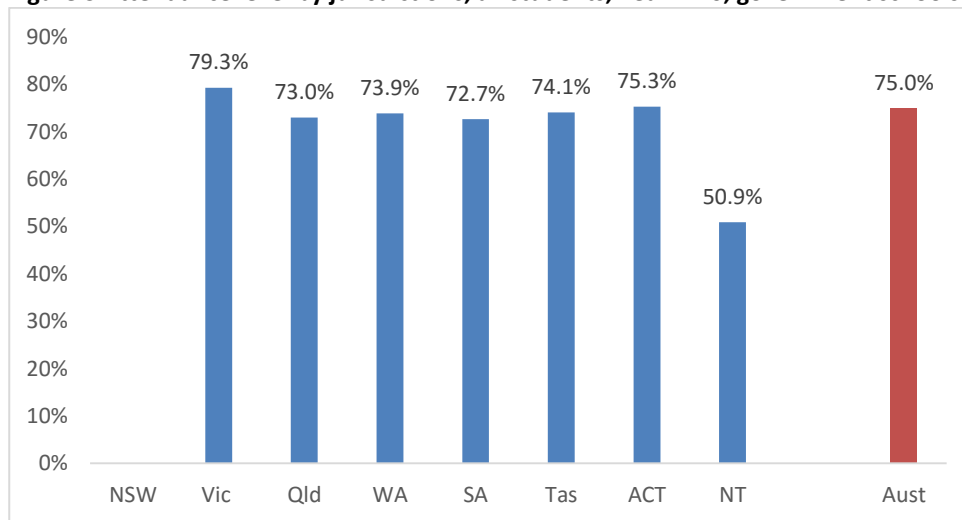
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.137.
NSW data is not available. The Australian total excludes NSW.

The pattern of the attendance level by year level (Figure 4) follows the pattern of the attendance rate by year level (Figure 2). The attendance level drops after Year 6.

Figure 4 Attendance level by year level, all students, government schools, Queensland and Australia 2015
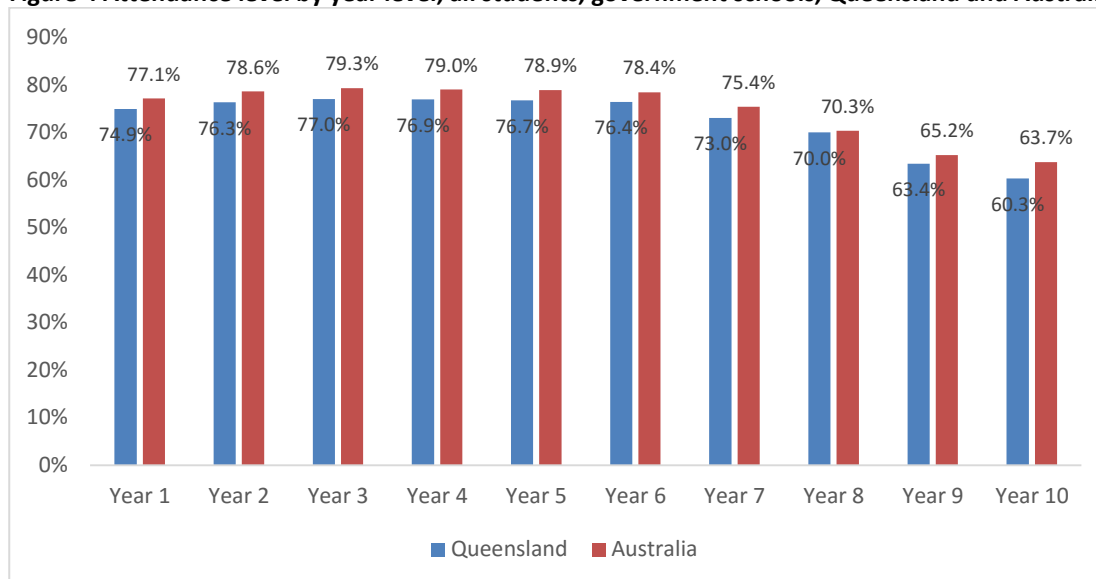
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.137.
NSW data is not available. The Australian total excludes NSW.

3.2.2 School attendance and Indigenous status

Government school attendance rates were lower for Indigenous students (ROGS 2016, 4.15). This applied to all year levels as shown in Figure 5 for Queensland. The figure also indicates that the difference between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous attendance rates increased from Year 7 onwards. As a result of that, when information is aggregated over individual years, the difference

in the attendance rates between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students in the year band 7 to 10 was larger than the respective difference for students in the year band 1 to 6.

Figure 5 Attendance rates by year level and Indigenous status, government schools, Queensland 2015
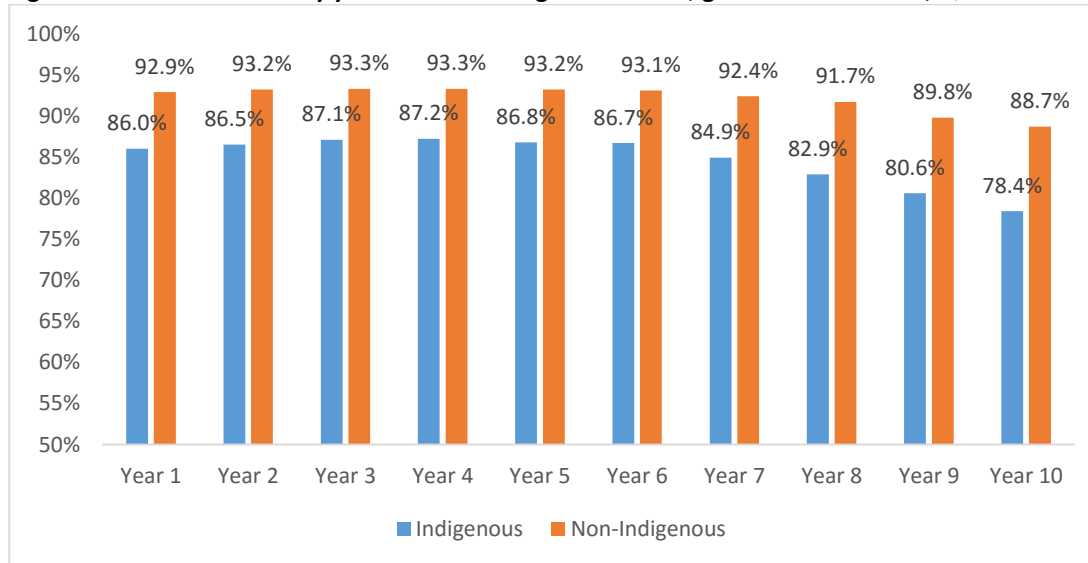
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.131.

Another way of quantifying the difference in the attendance rates between groups of students is to create the ratio of the groups' attendance rates. This generates a measure that indicates how much better or worse one group is compared to another. The closer the ratio is to 1, the more similar the two groups are. A value smaller than 1 indicates that the group of interest has a lower rate than the comparison group.

Applying this measure to Indigenous students (ratio=Indigenous attendance rate/Non-Indigenous attendance rate) and to the combined Years 1 to 6 and Years 7 to 10 reveals that the Indigenous gap in attendance rates was greater in Years 7 to 10 than in the Years 1 to 6 across all jurisdictions in 2015 (Figure 6). Indigenous and Non-Indigenous attendance rates were most unequal in Western Australia (WA) and the NT. While this applied to both the year bands 1 to 6 and 7 to 10, the Indigenous attendance gap for the latter was particularly large. Tasmania displayed the lowest level of inequality between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Government school attendance rates, expressed by featuring values closest to 1 for both year bands 1 to 6 and 7 to 10.

Figure 6 Indigenous to Non-Indigenous attendance rate ratio by year level band and jurisdiction, government schools 2015
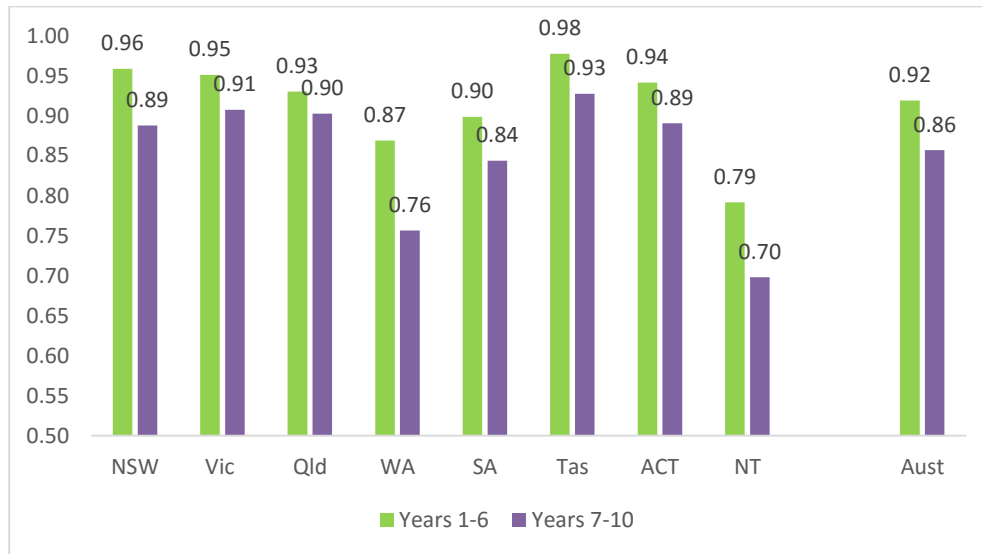
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.131.
NSW data was not collected on a comparable basis with other states and territories.
Indigenous to Non-indigenous attendance ratio=Indigenous attendance rate/Non-Indigenous attendance rate.

Figure 7 Attendance level by year level and Indigenous status, government schools, Queensland 2015
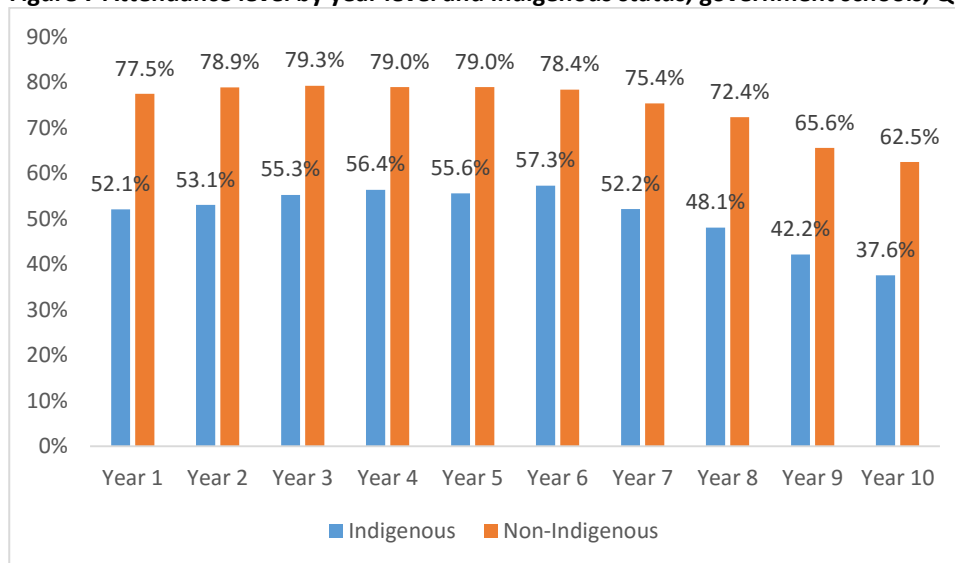
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.137.

The attendance level by Indigenous status (Figure 7) corresponds with the pattern observed for the attendance rate (Figure 5). Attendance levels in Queensland state schools were lower for Indigenous students across all year levels in 2015, and attendance levels decreased for both Indigenous and Non-indigenous students after Year 6. The difference in the attendance level between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students ranged from -21 percentage points in Year 6 to -26 percentage points in Year 2.

As was the case with the attendance rate (Figure 6), Indigenous students in the combined Years 1 to 6 had an attendance level that was closer to Non-Indigenous students' attendance level than students in the combined Years 7 to 10 across all jurisdictions for which data was available. This is expressed by the attendance level ratios in Figure 8. There was some variation in the attendance level ratios between jurisdictions. Reflecting the results for the attendance rates, Tasmania featured the lowest inequality between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous attendance levels for both Years 1 to 6 and Years 7 to 10 students, and WA and the NT featured the largest inequalities.

Figure 8 Indigenous to Non-Indigenous attendance level ratio by year level band and jurisdiction, government schools 2015

Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.137.
NSW data is not available. The Australian total excludes NSW.

Because students who identify as Indigenous have a lower school attendance, expressed in terms of their attendance level and their attendance rate, it is plausible that measures of school attendance correspond with population characteristics of Australian jurisdictions. This appears to be the case. The NT has by far the highest proportion of Indigenous population and features the lowest attendance level and rate. Victoria with the lowest proportion of Indigenous people has the highest attendance level and rate (Table 1).

Table 1 Proportion of Indigenous population, government school attendance rate and level by jurisdiction

	% Indigenous 2011^	Attendance rate 2015 (Year 1–10)	Attendance level 2015 (Year 1-10)
VIC	0.9	93.0	79.3
NSW	2.9	92.4	na
ACT	1.7	92.0	75.3
QLD	**4.2**	**91.6**	**73.0**
WA	3.8	91.2	73.9
Tas	4.7	91.1	74.1
SA	2.3	91.0	72.7
NT	29.8	81.6	50.9

^ ABS 3238.0.55.001, Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011

In this context, Queensland's school attendance level is in line with its proportion of Indigenous population and its attendance rate is slightly above empirical expectations drawn by estimating a linear regression model (Figure 9).

Figure 9 Government school attendance rate by proportion Indigenous population, Australian jurisdictions
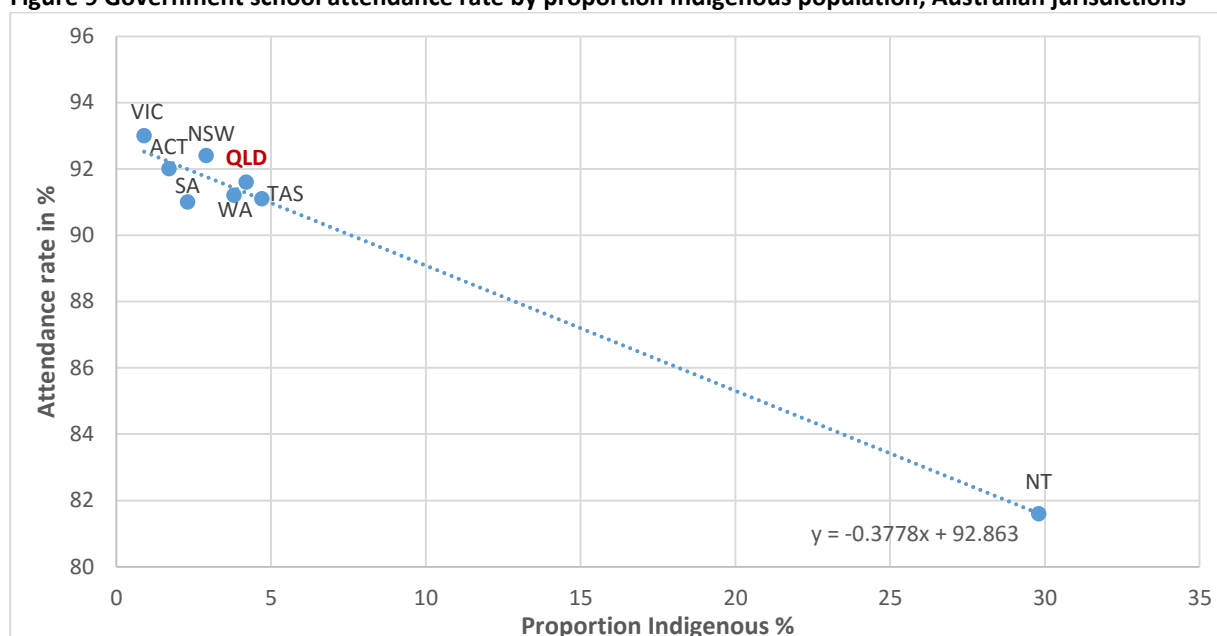
Source: ABS 3238.0.55.001, Estimates if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011; ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.131.

Excluding the NT from the above graph hardly impacts on the slope of the regression line. The regression coefficient b is -0.38 with the NT included and -0.37 with the NT excluded. The coefficients suggest that a one percentage point increase in a state's Indigenous proportion is, on average, associated with a decrease in the government school attendance rate of 0.37 to 0.38 percentage points.

3.2.3 School attendance and remoteness

Remoteness is another factor in school attendance, particularly for Indigenous students. The more remote the region where a school is located, the lower the attendance rate (Figure 10) and the

attendance level (Figure 11). This relationship is less pronounced in Queensland than in the rest of Australia; the Australian estimates are likely influenced by the remoteness characteristics and attendance rates in the NT.

Figure 10 Attendance rate by remoteness and Indigenous status, government schools, Queensland and Australia 2015
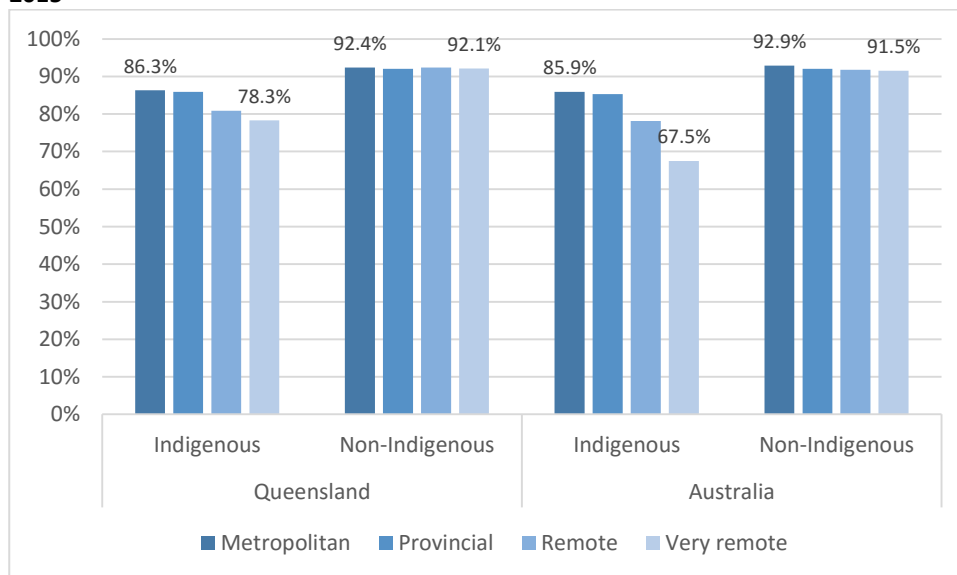
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.131.

Figure 11 Attendance level by remoteness and Indigenous status, government schools, Queensland and Australia 2015
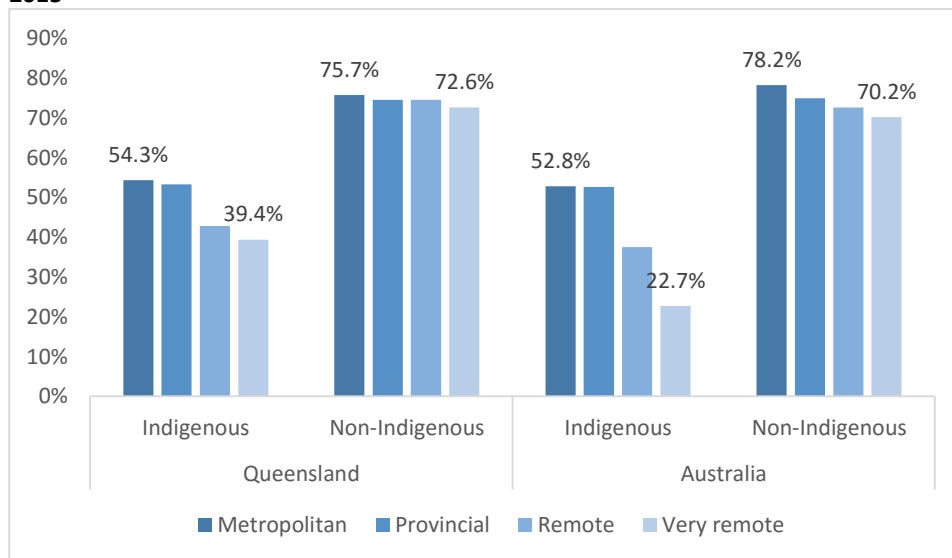
Source: ROGS 2016, Chapter 4, Table 4A.137.
NSW data was not available. The Australian total excludes NSW.

3.3 School attendance in Queensland

This section analyses attendance in Queensland state schools in more detail. It investigates the relationship between the attendance level and the attendance rate (3.3.1), factors associated with school attendance rates (3.3.2) and trends in the attendance rates over time (3.3.3).

The section is based on administrative data provided by DET. The data included information about 1,223 schools, 81 of which were combined schools, which housed primary as well as secondary school components. The data provided by DET contained two records for these combined schools, one with details specific to the primary school component, and one with details specific to the secondary school component. This was useful because school attendance is lower for later year levels (see Figure 2, Figure 4 and Table 2) so that secondary schools typically have lower attendance than primary schools.

Table 2 Distribution of 2015 attendance rate for primary and secondary records, Qld state schools

	25 percentile	Mean	75 percentile	N
Primary	91.3%	92.3%	94.1%	997
Secondary	87.7%	88.2%	90.9%	264
Total	**90.3%**	**91.5%**	**93.8%**	**1,261**

For the purpose of the following analysis, the 81 combined schools were treated as two schools as per structure in the provided data. Special schools (n=43) were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 997 records for primary schools and 264 records for secondary schools (Table 3).

Table 3 Primary and secondary records by school category, Qld state schools

	Primary	Secondary
Combined	81	81
Primary	916	0
Secondary	0	181
Total	**997**	**264**

To reduce the volatility in the proportions (e.g. Indigenous proportions, attendance rates) emanating from small student numbers, the analysis undertaken here only included school records with a full-time enrolment of more than 50 (in 2008). Schools with missing information on enrolment numbers (n=21) were also excluded. This further reduced the number of records, for primary schools to 748 and for secondary schools to 220 schools.

Smaller schools are more prevalent in more remote areas, so that the application of the filter removed proportionately most schools from Remote areas and least schools from Metropolitan areas least (Table 4).

Table 4 Number and percentage of excluded schools by Remoteness, Qld state schools

	Primary			Secondary		
	Excluded	**Total**	**% excluded**	**Excluded**	**Total**	**% excluded**
Metropolitan	19	370	5.1%	5	118	4.2%
Provincial City	6	82	7.3%	2	19	10.5%
Rural	141	402	35.1%	17	85	20.0%
Remote	83	143	58.0%	20	42	47.6%
Total	**249**	**997**	**25.0%**	**44**	**264**	**16.7%**

Excluded schools include schools with full-time enrolment<=50 and schools with no information on enrolment.

The selection also excluded proportionately more schools from Darling Downs - South West and Central Queensland (Table 5).

Table 5 Number and percentage of excluded schools by Region, Qld state schools

	Primary			Secondary		
	Excluded	**Total**	**% excluded**	**Excluded**	**Total**	**% excluded**
Central Queensland	62	159	39.0%	11	41	26.8%
Darling Downs South West	85	185	45.9%	19	47	40.4%
Far North Queensland	23	83	27.7%	4	25	16.0%
Metropolitan	13	184	7.1%	1	48	2.1%
North Coast	23	172	13.4%	4	44	9.1%
North Queensland	29	89	32.6%	3	22	13.6%
South East	14	125	11.2%	2	37	5.4%
Total	**249**	**997**	**25.0%**	**44**	**264**	**16.7%**

Excluded schools include schools with full-time enrolment<=50 and schools with no information on enrolment

In the case of secondary schools, the removed schools tended to have a higher proportion of Indigenous students than the schools not removed from the sample (Table 6).

Table 6 Mean Indigenous proportion by schools included and excluded, Qld state schools

	Excluded	**Included**	**Total**
Primary	10.5%	10.4%	10.4%
Secondary	27.1%	10.6%	12.9%

Key information about school characteristics in the provided data, such as enrolment figures and Indigenous proportions related to 2008. Because of that, where these school characteristics were relevant in the analysis, the 2008 data was used. The unit of analysis in this section is schools, so that all statements about relationships with attendance relate to schools (not students as in the ROGS reporting).

3.3.1 Attendance level and attendance rate

The attendance level in the ROGS reporting (Section 3.2.1) described the proportion of students with an attendance rate of 90% or higher. The reverse measure of attendance would describe the proportion of students with an attendance rate of less than 90%. A similar measure that indicates a low attendee proportion of students with an attendance rate of less than 85% in 2008 was included in the data provided by DET. This measure was highly correlated with the attendance rate in the same year. The higher the proportion of low attendee students at a school the lower the school's attendance rate tended to be (Figure 12).

This very similarly applied to primary (R squared=0.91) and secondary schools (R squared=0.88). At the high end of the low attendee proportion range, schools' attendance rates depart more from the regression line. The correlation between the attendance level and the attendance rate would be even higher if few schools with exceptionally large low attendee proportions were excluded from the graph.

Figure 12 Attendance rate by low attendee proportion, state schools, Queensland 2008
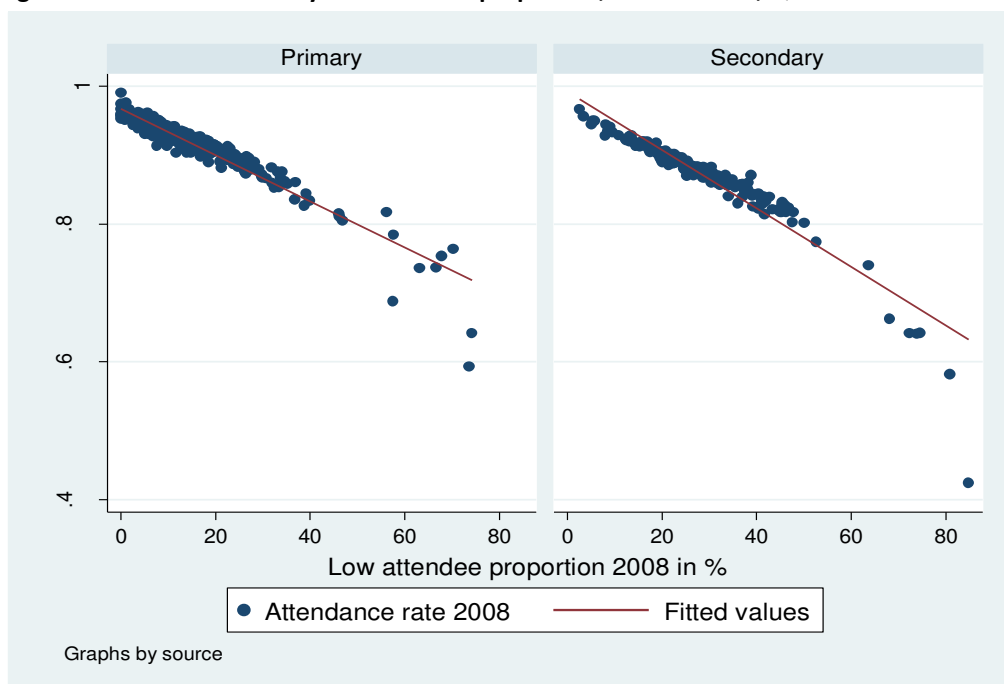
Primary and Secondary schools with 2008 full-time enrolments>50.
The low attendee proportion describes the proportion of students who attended less than 85% of possible school days.

3.3.2 Associations with attendance in Queensland

Results presented in Section 3.2 suggest that Indigenous status, remoteness and school type (primary or secondary) are important influences on attendance rates and levels in Queensland

state schools. This section explores these associations further by considering combinations of these characteristics in relation to the attendance rate.

Since attendance data is non-normally distributed, models were specified as multiple logistic regressions, which modelled the probability of schools having a high attendance rate. This allowed for the identifying of the relative statistical influence a variable had on the probability of having a high attendance rate in the context of the influences of the other variables in the model.

As attendance rates are typically higher for primary schools than secondary schools, the analysis was undertaken separately for primary and secondary schools.

The measure used as the dependent variable was a binary indicator of high attendance, where high attendance was specified as follows[3]:

- High attendance rate for primary schools was defined as >=94% (about 27% of primary schools with a full-time enrolment of more than 50 students fell into this category); and
- High attendance rate for secondary schools was defined as >=90% (about 22% of secondary schools with a full-time enrolment of more than 50 students fell into this category).

The following variables were included as independent variables in these models:

Variable name	Description
Low Indigenous density	Quintile 1 indicating the 20% of schools with the lowest Indigenous proportion. The quintile was included in the dataset and had been separately calculated for primary and secondary schools.
Metropolitan	Indicates that a school was located in a Metropolitan area, based on the Metropolitan category in DET's EQ Zone variable.
High SES area	Quintile 5 of Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage scores indicating the 20% of schools in the least socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, generated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for areas, combines information on population characteristics seen as indicating disadvantage.
Large school	Indicating schools with larger student populations. Larger primary schools were defined as >=346 students (about half the schools in the relevant sample fell into this category). Secondary schools were defined as large when they had more than 722 students (about half of the schools in the relevant sample fell into this category).

As noted earlier, information on key variables (Indigenous density, student population size and relative socio economic disadvantage) related to 2008 in the available data. In order to investigate

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[3] The high attendance thresholds were selected to categorise about 25% of included schools as 'high attendance schools' while also representing intuitively clear cut-offs.

associations between schools' characteristics and schools' attendance rates, the attendance rates modelled related to the same year as the school characteristics (2008). This was to ensure that the information on school characteristics that was thought to influence attendance reliably connected with information on attendance, as school characteristics might change over time. To the extent that these underlying relationships between variables are stable over time, these findings should be equally valid for more recent data.

The results for both models are shown in Table 7. All of the independent variables were included as binary variables in the regression models. The produced coefficients show the relative difference between the indicator category (e.g. metropolitan) and its respective reference category (e.g. non-metropolitan) while controlling for the other variables in the model.

Results are displayed as odds ratios, which give the ratio of the odds of having a high attendance rate for the indicator category, in relation to the odds of having a high attendance rate for the reference category. For example, other things included in the model being equal, the odds of primary schools with a low Indigenous proportion to feature a high attendance rate were 2.26 times higher than the odds of primary schools with no low Indigenous density in the student population.

This result was more pronounced for secondary schools where the odds of having a high attendance rate for schools with a low Indigenous student density were about six times higher. Schools located in areas of high socio-economic status were also significantly more likely to fall into the high attendance category, whether they were primary or secondary schools. Being located in a metropolitan area was associated with higher odds of high attendance for primary schools, while school size as it was defined here was not associated with the probability of having a high attendance rate, neither for primary nor secondary schools.

Table 7 Regression output for modelling high attendance rate, state schools, Queensland 2008

Indicator category	Reference category	Primary	Secondary
Large school	Not large	0.82	0.61
Low Indigenous density	Not low	2.26***	6.08***
High SES area	Not high	4.77***	3.60***
Metropolitan area	Not metropolitan	1.58*	0.77
Number of observations		748	220
Prob>chi2		0.0000	0.0000
Pseudo R-squared		0.13	0.19

Models included primary and secondary schools with full-time enrolment>50.
*significant at 95% confidence level
** significant at 99% confidence level
*** significant at 99.9% confidence level
ns - not significant
Combined schools were included as primary as well as secondary schools with the information respectively pertaining to the relevant school type.

Associations between remoteness, socio-economic disadvantage and Indigenous density on the one hand, and school attendance rates in Queensland on the other, have been recognised elsewhere (e.g. DETE 2013, Performance Insights: School attendance, http://education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/docs/performance-insights-report.pdf). The modelling undertaken here confirms the relevance of these matters, but also suggests that each of these constructs has an independent influence on attendance. Because of that, these three factors can have a cumulative influence on a school's attendance outcomes.

This is demonstrated in Table 8, which illustrates the compounding influence of the three factors on school attendance for primary schools. To this end, four categories were derived as follows:

Category	Definition
No/low disadvantage	Schools that are not in the first quintile of IRSD score and not in fifth quintile of Indigenous proportion, and not in a Remote area
Low SES only	Schools that are in the first quintile of IRSD score and not in the fifth quintile of Indigenous proportion, and not in a Remote area
Low SES and high Indigenous density only	Schools that are in the first quintile of IRSD score and in the fifth quintile of Indigenous proportion, and not in a Remote area
Low SES, high Indigenous density and remote	Schools that are in the first quintile of IRSD score and in the fifth quintile of Indigenous proportion, and in a Remote area

Table 8, which presents average and median scores on attendance measures for the above four categories, illustrates that a school's low attendee proportion tends to go up and its attendance rate tends to go down with each additional factor of disadvantage added.

Table 8 Example of compounding influences of three factors on school attendance, state primary schools, Queensland 2008

	Average low attendee proportion	Average attendance rate	Median attendance rate	Number of schools
No/low disadvantage	8.9%	93.6%	93.6%	494
Low SES only	15.2%	91.9%	91.9%	84
Low SES and high Indigenous density only	20.9%	90.0%	91.1%	47
Low SES, high Indigenous density and remote	45.2%	80.3%	82.6%	18

Quintile position is based on measures included in DET data and are specific to primary schools.
Only primary schools with full-time enrolment>50 were included.

3.3.3 Trends in attendance rates

There was a change in the way attendance rates were calculated and reported by DET in 2013 (for more detail see http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/statistics/student-attendance.html), and the Department advises taking care when comparing attendance rates before 2013 with attendance rates after 2013. Within this context, the investigation in this section carefully probes for discernible trends in school attendance rates.

The graphs below track the average primary (Figure 13) and secondary (Figure 14) school attendance rates for DET regions between 2008 and 2015. The break in the time series caused by the change in methodology in 2013 is indicated by the vertical dotted line. The plotting of the rates over time reveals improvements in most regions for primary as well as secondary schools over the two most recent years considered, after the change in methodology occurred in 2013.

Figure 13 Average school attendance rates by region, state primary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
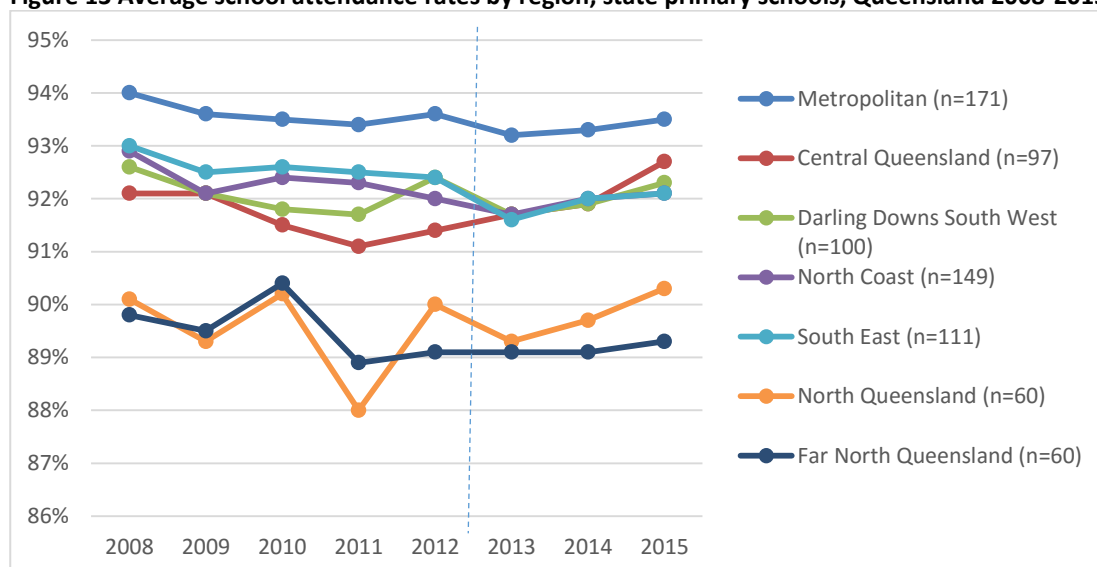
Figure excludes schools with full-time enrolment of less than 50.
The number of schools advised in the brackets relates to 2015.
The dotted line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

Figure 14 Average school attendance rates by region, state secondary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
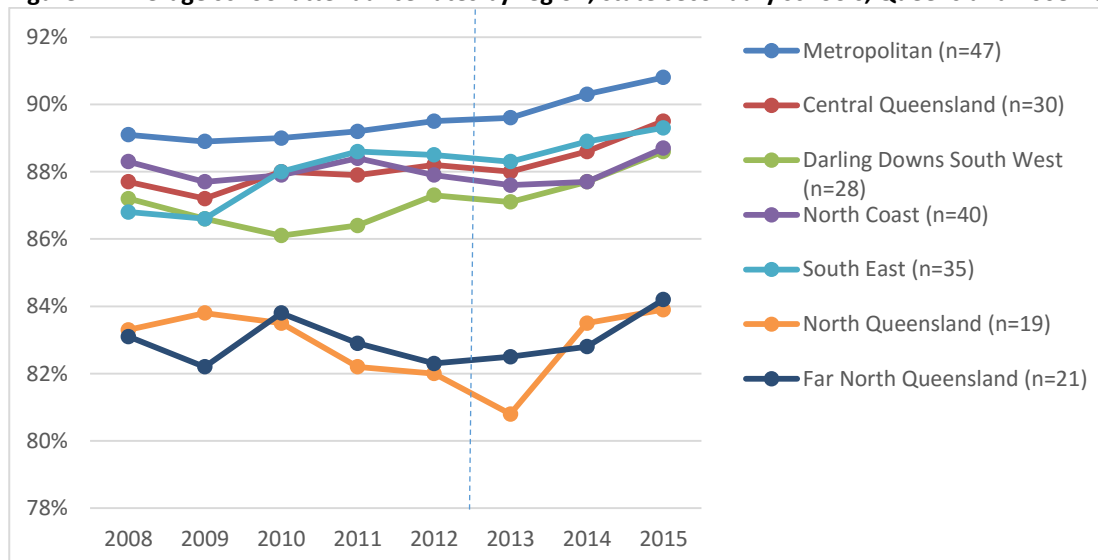
Figure excludes schools with full-time enrolment of less than 50.
The number of schools advised in the brackets relates to 2015.
The dotted line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

If attendance rates are plotted over time, the linear regression slope describes the average change from one year to the next over the period in question. The boxplots in Figure 15 illustrate the distribution of these slopes for primary and secondary schools.[4] Most of the slopes fall within the two vertical whisker lines at either end of the boxplot. Half of the schools' slopes lie within the rectangular blue shaded box (that is, between the top and bottom quartile). The vertical line within the box marks the median slope (50% of schools fall below this value and 50% above). The distribution of slopes indicated by these boxplots suggests that secondary schools tended to have more average yearly increases in attendance rates than decreases in these rates over the period 2008 to 2015.

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[4] A box plot (also known as a box-and-whisker plot) displays the distribution of a variable in a way that highlights key summary statistics of the distribution: the median (a line separating the top 50% of values from the lower 50% that would appear in the middle of the box for a normally distributed, and any symmetric, variable); the 25th and 75th percentiles (Q1 and Q3), which mark the two ends of the box; and the whiskers, which mark the so-called upper and lower adjacent values (which are the most extreme values within 1.5 times the inter-quartile range (Q3-Q1) from the end of the box). The dots mark 'outliers', i.e. the observations that lie outside the adjacent values.

Figure 15 Slope of linear trend line of attendance rates, state primary and secondary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
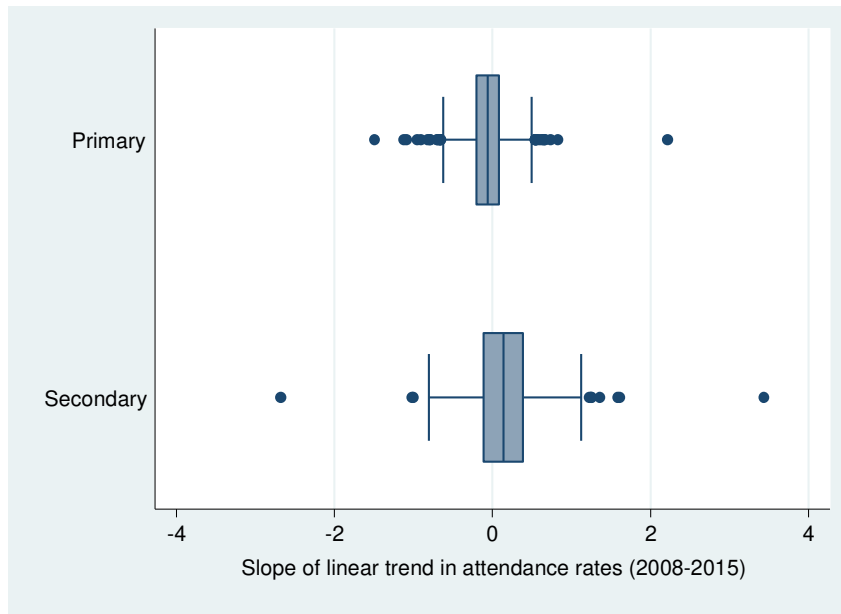
Schools with full-time enrolment of more than 50 in 2008.
Note that there was a change in attendance rate calculation in 2013.

Although primary schools collectively did not show an upward trend in average attendance rates, primary schools with more than 50 students in Remote areas did show such a trend. Figure 16 illustrates this by plotting the proportion of schools with 'low', 'medium' and 'high' attendance rates over time. 'Low', 'medium' and 'high' were defined relative to the distributions of primary and secondary schools' attendance rates in Queensland in 2008, which resulted in 'medium' categories with fairly narrow ranges. The detailed criteria can be found under the respective graphs showing attendance patterns.

Applying these categories to attendance rates reveals that the proportion of primary schools with low attendance rates in Remote areas has declined since 2010 while the proportion of primary schools with attendance rates in the medium range has increased. Figure 16 confirms the increase in attendance rates over the last two years between 2013 and 2015 that was suggested by Figure 13 across all remoteness categories.

Figure 16 School attendance rate by remoteness, state primary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
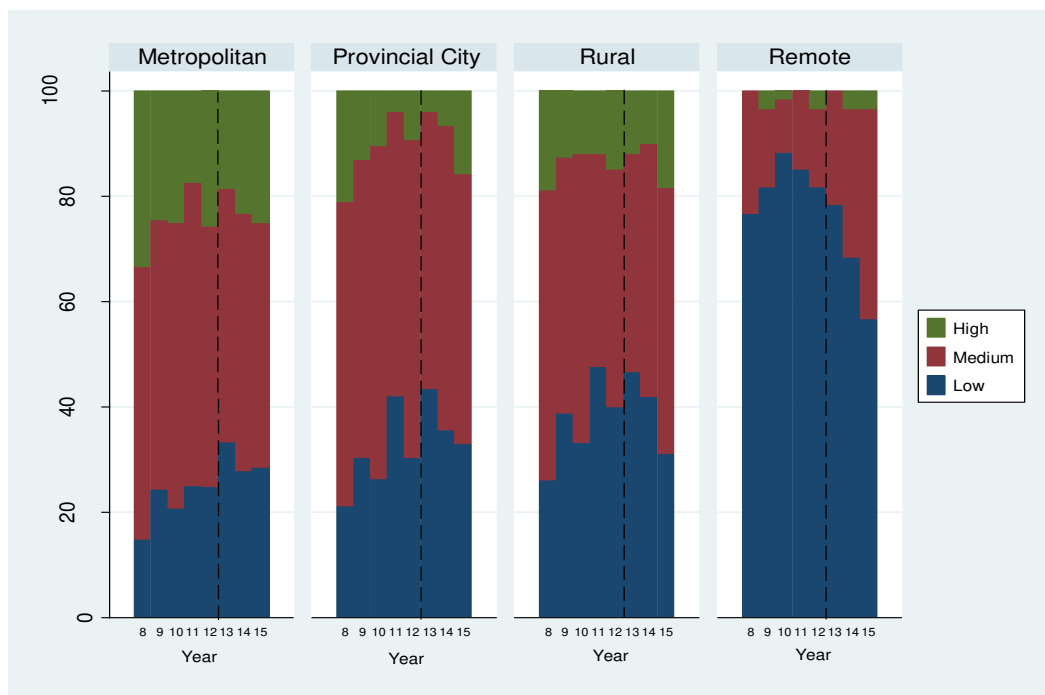
Primary schools with a full-time enrolment of more than 50 in 2008.
The low, mid and high categories were defined using the interquartile range of primary schools' (with FTE>50) attendance rates in 2008. Low: <91.8% (about 25% of primary schools in 2008); medium: 91.8% to 94.1% (about 50% of primary schools in 2008); high: >94.1% (about 25% of primary schools in 2008).
The percentages displayed are based on n=351 Metropolitan schools, n=76 Provincial City schools, 261 Rural schools and 60 Remote schools.
The dashed line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

In contrast to primary schools in Metropolitan areas, secondary schools in these areas improved their attendance rates over the period 2008-2015 (Figure 17). As was the case with primary schools, secondary schools also showed an upward movement in their attendance rates between 2013 and 2015 across all remoteness categories.

Figure 17 School attendance rate by remoteness, state secondary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
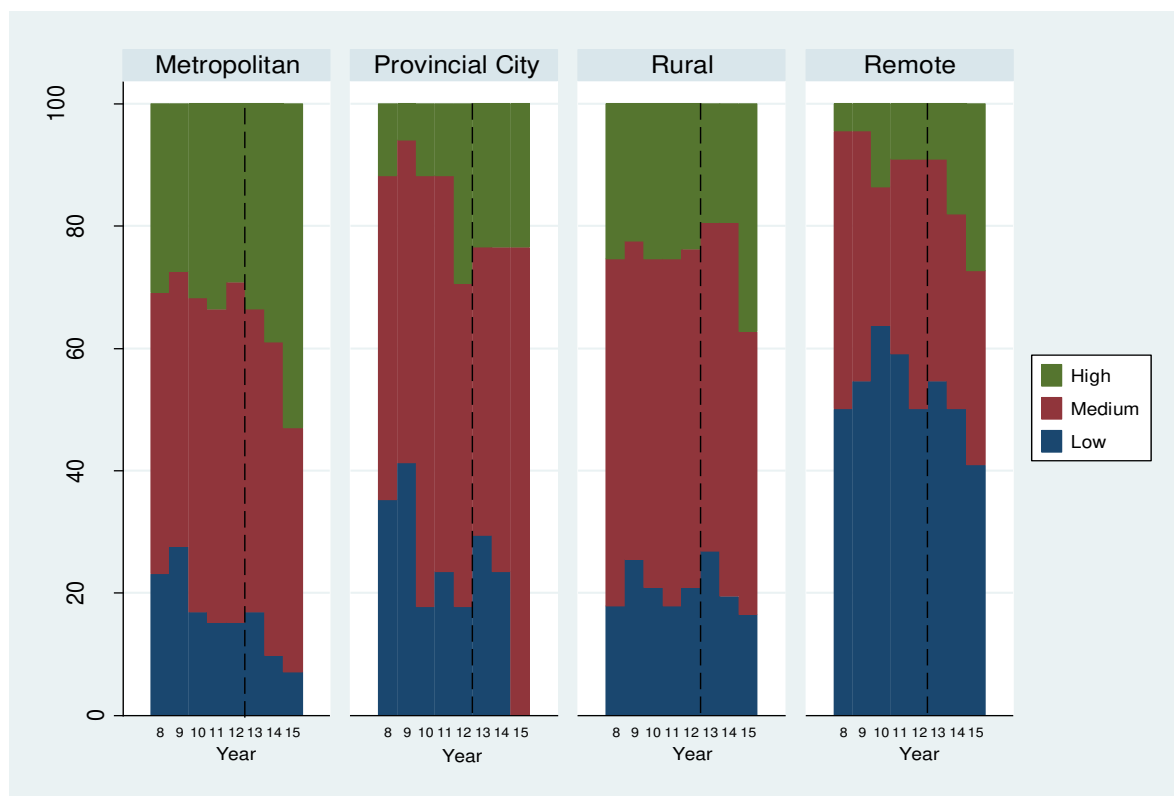
Secondary schools with a full-time enrolment of more than 50 in 2008.
The low, mid and high categories were defined using the interquartile range of secondary schools' (with FTE>50) attendance rates in 2008. Low: <85.8% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2008); medium: 85.8% to 89.8% (about 50% of secondary schools in 2008); high: >89.8% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2008).
The percentages displayed are based on n=113 Metropolitan schools, n=17 Provincial City schools, 68 Rural schools and 22 Remote schools.
The dashed line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

The figures also reveal that the amalgamated consideration of Rural and Remote regions in attendance reporting may be misleading. There is no great difference between schools in Rural areas and schools in Provincial cities, and the attendance profiles in both regions appear closer to the attendance profile in Metropolitan areas than to that of Remote areas.

Plotting the attendance rate categories for the seven regions over time complements the reporting of the average rates for regions in Figure 13 and Figure 14 as it reveals in more detail in which way schools' attendance rates have changed over time, but also in which way attendance rates vary across regions (Figure 18 and Figure 19). For example, it highlights the positive position of the Metropolitan region when it comes to school attendance rates (signified by its much larger proportion of schools in the high attendance category), and demonstrates that the overall decline in primary schools' attendance rates in the South East region between 2008 and 2012 was a combination of a decline in high attendance rates that occurred in parallel with increases in low

attendance rates. The earlier noted increase in attendance rates for primary and secondary schools between 2013 and 2015 is reflected in the results for all regions.

Figure 18 School attendance rate by region, state primary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
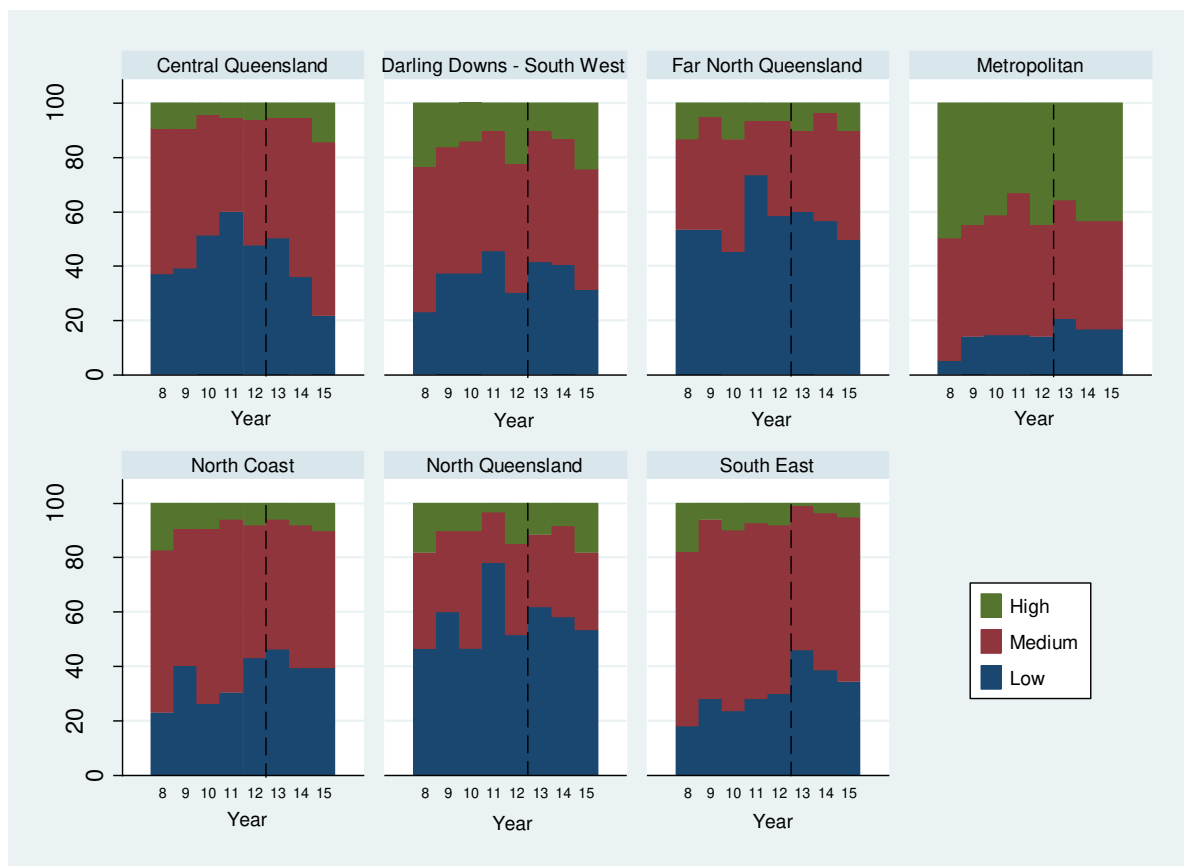
Primary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008.
The low, mid and high categories were defined using the interquartile range of primary schools' (with FTE>50) attendance rates in 2008. Low: <91.8% (about 25% of primary schools in 2008); medium: 91.8% to 94.1% (about 50% of primary schools in 2008); high: >94.1% (about 25% of primary schools in 2008).
The dashed line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

Figure 19 School attendance rate by region, state secondary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
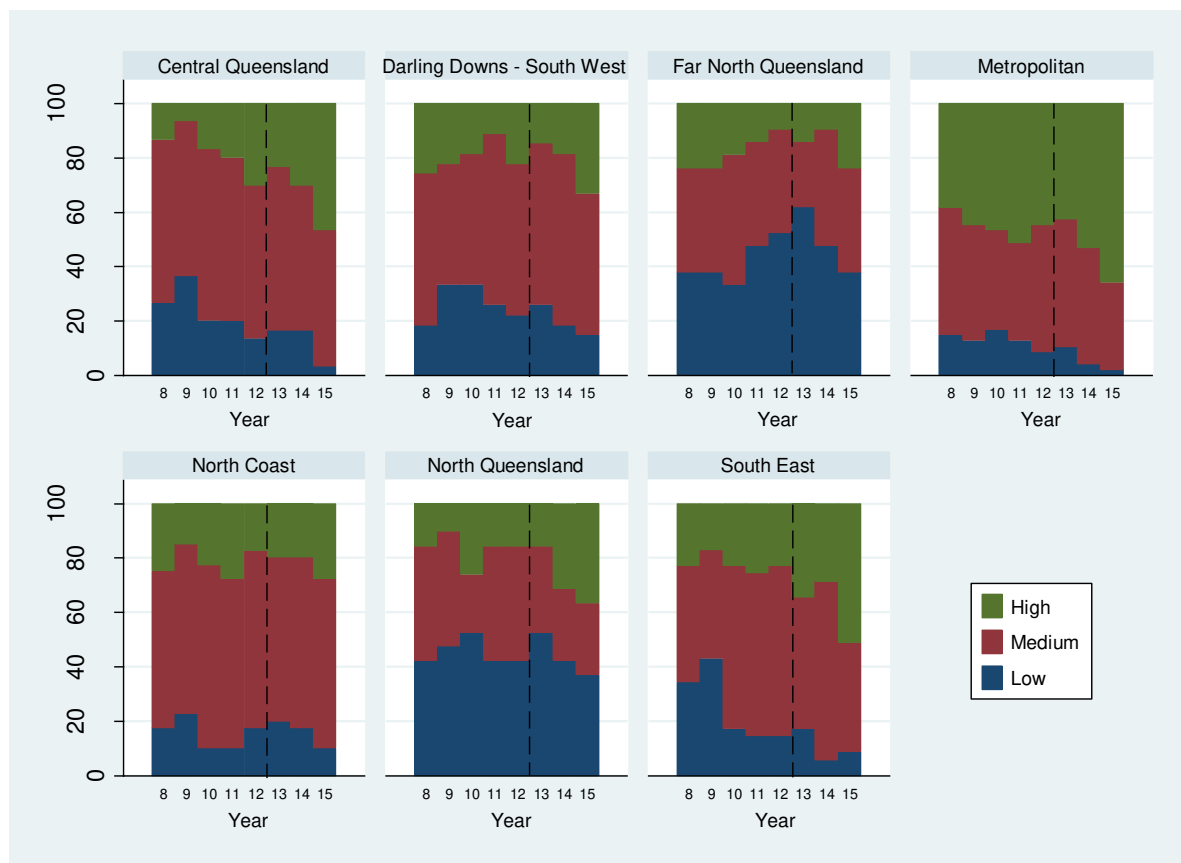
Secondary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008.
The low, mid and high categories were defined using the interquartile range of secondary schools' (with FTE>50) attendance rates in 2008. Low: <85.8% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2008); medium: 85.8% to 89.8% (about 50% of secondary schools in 2008); high: >89.8% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2008).
The dashed line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

Section 3.3.3 has so far been concerned with trends in school attendance rates at an aggregate level (Queensland, Remoteness areas, DET regions). To explore if there were particular patterns in the way individual schools' attendance rates evolved over the period 2008 to 2015, Sequence Analysis was performed using the above categories for low, medium and high attendance rates. This analysis identifies and groups together schools with similar sequences in attendance categories over the period. Eight distinct clusters were identified for primary schools, while five separate groups were found for secondary schools.

Figure 20 and Figure 21 show attendance patterns over time within each of the identified clusters, for primary and secondary schools respectively. Within each cluster, each individual school's trajectory is represented by a horizontal line marking the sequence of attendance rate categories between 2008 and 2015 by using different colours for different categories. The numbers along the vertical axes indicate the number of schools in a cluster. The patterns illustrate the differences between the distinct clusters identified in this analysis but may also be of further interest in that

44

they suggest, for example, that schools had different journeys over the period to arrive at similar places. Schools in the clusters 2, 4, 5 and 6 in Figure 20 all end in predominantly medium attendance rates at the end of the period, but each cluster shows a different trajectory prior of getting there in 2014/15.

Figure 20 School attendance trend clusters, state primary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
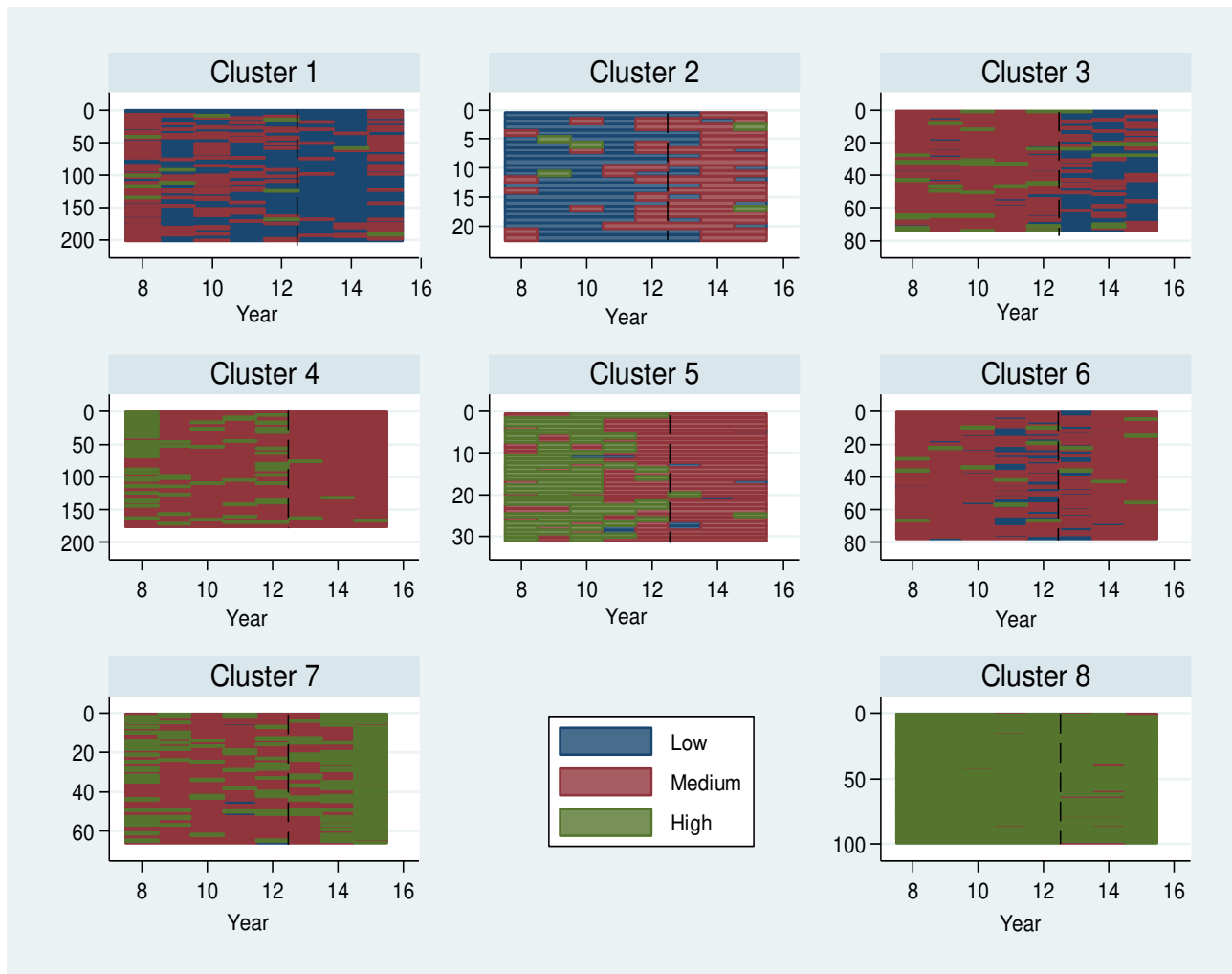
Primary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008.
The low, mid and high categories were defined using the interquartile range of primary schools' (with FTE>50) attendance rates in 2008. Low: <91.8% (about 25% of primary schools in 2008); medium: 91.8% to 94.1% (about 50% of primary schools in 2008); high: >94.1% (about 25% of primary schools in 2008).
The dashed line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

Summary school characteristics for the eight clusters of primary schools are displayed in Table 9. Consistent with earlier results, clusters that include schools, which tended to have a high attendance rate in 2008, clusters 4, 5, 7 and 8, were characterised by higher IRSD scores (indicating areas of lower socio-economic disadvantage) and lower proportions of Indigenous students (here both characteristics are indicated by median scores of schools within a cluster). Schools in these four clusters were well represented in Metropolitan areas and very little or not at

all in Remote areas. The 99 schools in Cluster 8, which includes schools that tended to have high attendance rates throughout the period 2008 and 2015 had the highest median IRSD score, the lowest median Indigenous student proportion and they were mostly situated in Metropolitan areas.

Table 9 School characteristics by Cluster from Sequence Analysis, state primary schools, Queensland 2008

	Number of schools	Median Full-time Enrolments	Median % Indigenous	Median IRSD	Median Low Attendees Proportion in %	% Metropolitan	% Remote
Cluster 1	201	263	13%	937	17	33%	20%
Cluster 2	22	118	7%	960	15	9%	36%
Cluster 3	74	298	7%	966	11	51%	3%
Cluster 4	176	465	4%	989	9	59%	2%
Cluster 5	31	379	3%	997	7	58%	0%
Cluster 6	78	274	4%	971	11	28%	6%
Cluster 7	66	214	4%	1,000	8	45%	0%
Cluster 8	99	464	2%	1,046	5	72%	0%
Total	**747**	**345**	**5%**	**975**	**11**	**47%**	**8%**

Primary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008, and with non-missing attendance rates between 2008 and 2015.

In contrast, schools that displayed low or medium attendance rates in 2008, schools in clusters 1, 2, 3 and 6, tended to have lower IRSD scores indicating their location in areas of higher socio-economic disadvantage. Schools in clusters 1, 2 and 6 also had a below average representation in Metropolitan areas, and one in five schools in Cluster 1 was located in a Remote area as was one in three schools in Cluster 2.

Primary schools in Cluster 2 and Cluster 7 tended to show an upward trend in attendance rates over the period 2008 to 2015. Common to those two clusters is that they contain schools, which tended to be of smaller size in terms of their full-time equivalent student population in 2008. However, both clusters included schools with a wide range of student populations so that a potential link between school size and attendance trends would need further investigation.

Cluster membership for secondary schools showed a pattern similar to that of primary schools, with schools with high attendance rates throughout the eight year period (Cluster 5 in Figure 21) having the lowest median proportion of Indigenous students, the highest median IRSD score, while showing the largest representation of all clusters in Metropolitan areas and the lowest

representation in Remote areas (Table 10). Virtually the reverse applies to schools with predominantly low attendance rates over the period (Cluster 1 in Figure 21).

Figure 21 School attendance trend clusters, state secondary schools, Queensland 2008-2015
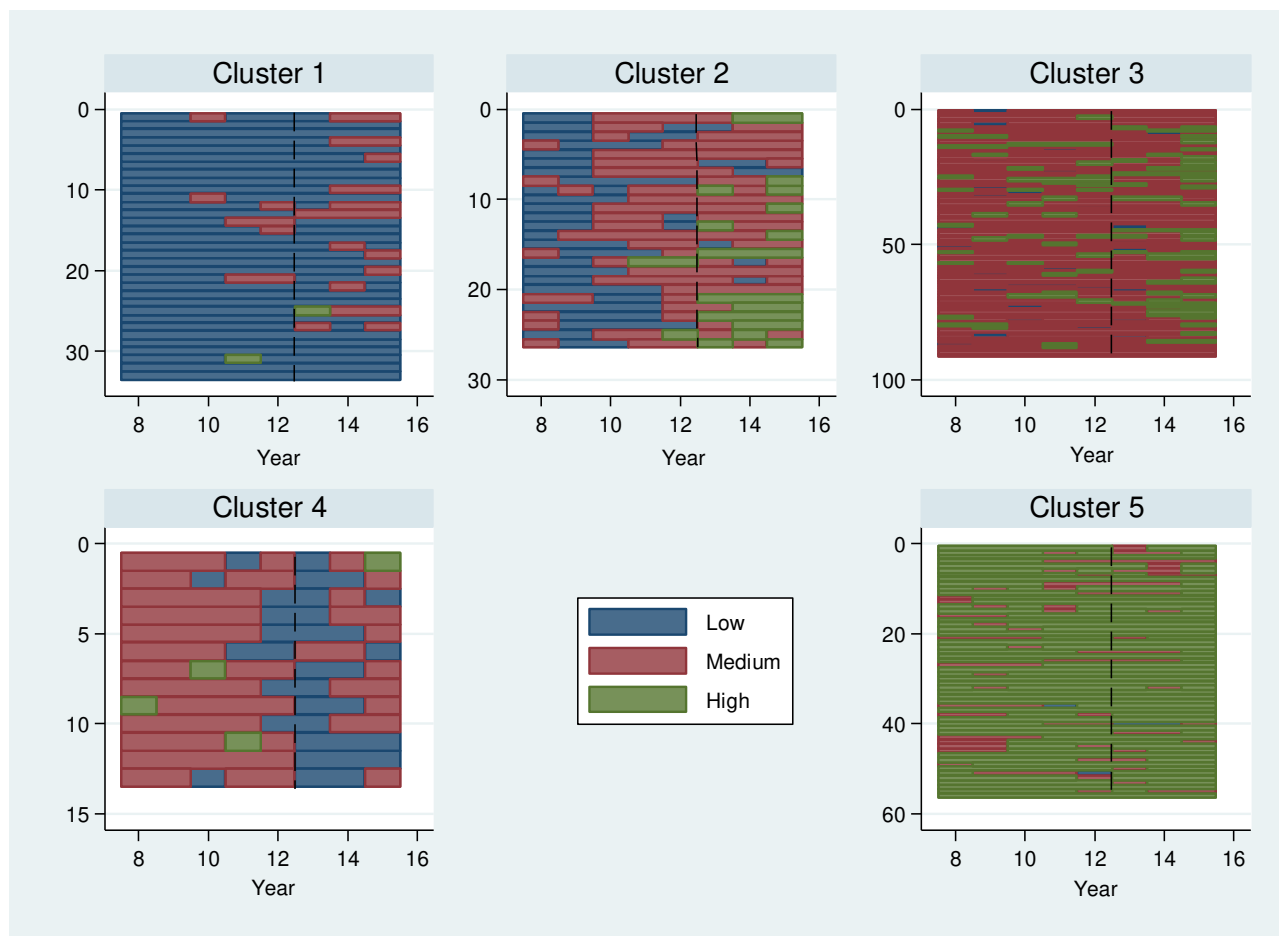
Secondary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008.
The low, mid and high categories were defined using the interquartile range of secondary schools' (with FTE>50) attendance rates in 2008. Low: <85.8% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2008); medium: 85.8% to 89.8% (about 50% of secondary schools in 2008); high: >89.8% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2008).
Change in attendance rate calculation in 2013.
The dashed line indicates the change in attendance rate calculation in 2013, which could have affected the displayed pattern.

Table 10 School characteristics by Cluster from Sequence Analysis, state secondary schools, Queensland 2008

	Number of schools	Median Full-time Enrolments	Median % Indigenous	Median IRSD	Median Low Attendees Proportion in %	% Metropolitan	% Remote
Cluster 1	33	365	20%	943	41	33%	33%
Cluster 2	26	790	6%	964	37	58%	8%
Cluster 3	91	874	5%	981	26	52%	5%
Cluster 4	13	616	8%	946	30	31%	15%
Cluster 5	56	808	3%	1,006	18	64%	4%
Total	**219**	**729**	**5%**	**973**	**26**	**52%**	**10%**

Secondary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008, and with non-missing attendance rates between 2008 and 2015.

For both primary and secondary schools, the sequence analysis presented here underlines a substantial diversity in and among schools with similar end outcomes. The investigation into links between school characteristics and trajectories was limited because the majority of school characteristics in the available data related to 2008 only. It is possible that changes in schools' proportions of Indigenous students over time, for example, correlated with changes in schools' attendance rates, which could not be investigated with the available data.

The sequence clusters may be of interest in the context of the selected 50 schools for the qualitative research component, because the selection method may have targeted some of the clusters only. This was the case for primary schools. Of the selected 17 primary schools, clusters 3, 4, 5 and 8 are not represented. Clusters 3 to 5 include schools whose trajectory of attendance rates tended to decline over the period and cluster 8 included schools that tended to have high attendance rates throughout the period. The absence of these schools among the 17 selected primary schools is due to the selection mechanism including a step of filtering in schools that featured increases in attendance rates over the five year period ending in 2015.

For secondary schools this does not apply. All clusters are represented among the selected 33 secondary schools. This is because secondary schools tended to increase their attendance rates throughout the State so that there is no cluster for schools with declining trends in attendance that would have been excluded by the selection mechanism.

So far, the presentation of trends in this section has been concerned with absolute trends – differences in schools' attendance rates over time given their initial attendance rate in 2008. The following two tables allow a broad look at schools' relative change in attendance – that is change of a school in relation to the school's relative position when schools' are ranked according to their attendance rate. This is achieved by comparing in which of the three categories a school fell into in 2008 and in which category the same school fell into in 2015. Different from before where the attendance categories for all years were based on the distribution of school attendance rates in 2008, here the 'low', 'medium' and 'high' categories for 2015 are based on the distribution of attendance rates in 2015. This ensures that for 2008 as well as for 2015, low covers the bottom 25% of schools, high covers the top 25% of schools and medium the 50% of schools with attendance rates between low and high. This method is de-facto a standardisation that can control for state-wide shifts in attendance rates including those that may have been caused by the change in methodology in 2013. For example, if attendance rates generally went up, as was the case for

secondary schools between 2008 and 2015 in Queensland (Figure 15), were there many schools that improved or worsened their relative position within the overall improvement?

The tables reveal that the majority (60% or more) of primary (Table 11) and secondary (Table 12) schools were in the same category in 2015 as they were in 2008. Very few primary schools managed a change from high to low (n=7) or vice versa (n=7).

Table 11 School attendance rates 2015 by attendance rates 2008, state primary schools, Queensland

	2015			
2008	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**	**Total**
Low (n=183)	62%	34%	4%	100%
Medium (n=383)	16%	65%	19%	100%
High (n=182)	4%	36%	60%	100%

Primary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008.
The 2008 categorisation of attendance rates is based on the distribution of attendance rates in 2008 (see notes under Figure 16). The 2015 categorisation of attendance rates is based on the distribution of attendance rates in 2015 (see notes for primary schools under Figure 22).

No secondary school changed its position from high to low or vice versa.

Table 12 School attendance rates 2015 by attendance rates 2008, state secondary schools, Queensland

	2015			
2008	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**	**Total**
Low (n=56)	66%	34%	0.0%	100%
Medium (n=109)	18%	64%	17%	100%
High (n=55)	0.0%	40%	60%	100%

Secondary schools with a full-time enrolment>50 in 2008.
The 2008 categorisation of attendance rates is based on the distribution of attendance rates in 2008 (see notes under Figure 17). The 2015 categorisation of attendance rates is based on the distribution of attendance rates in 2015 (see Secondary notes under Figure 22).

The next section focuses on investigating the characteristics of the 50 schools selected for the qualitative component in order to tap into diversity within that group.

3.4 Schools selected for qualitative research

DET selected 50 schools for qualitative research to be conducted by UQ's School of Education. The Department applied a set of criteria to identify schools that had a full-time enrolment of more than 100 with an improving trend in attendance over time. Fifty schools were selected from the resulting pool of schools with improved attendance rates. The selection of the 50 schools took into account regional distributions, Indigenous status and school size.

To inform the qualitative component of the project, this section first explores the extent to which the 50 schools represent the entire state school population in Queensland, and then groups schools with similar characteristics into clusters to assist the selection of cases studies for further analysis.

3.4.1 Representativeness of selected schools

The Department selected 17 primary schools (34% of the 50 selected schools) and 33 secondary schools (66%) for the first stage of qualitative research. This included some combined schools that offered primary as well as secondary components, but each combined school was selected in relation to one of the components only. Secondary schools were overrepresented among the selected schools as their proportion (excluding special schools) was about 21% of the school population (and 25% when only schools with a full-time enrolment of > 100 were considered). The selection mechanism also lead to an overrepresentation of larger schools as schools with a full-time enrolment of less than 100 were excluded from the first step in the selection process (Table 13).

Table 13 Mean and median full-time enrolments 2008, selected and non-selected state schools, Queensland

	Full-time enrolments	
	Mean	Median
50 selected schools(n=50)	544	469
Other schools (n=2,211)	373	246
All (n=1,261)	380	259

Special schools were excluded.
81 combined schools were included twice in the data – with one record for primary and one record for secondary school with school information specific to the primary or secondary component.

If only schools with a full-time enrolment of more than 100 are considered (one of the criteria of DET's selection process), the selected primary schools, in 2008, tended to:

- have a higher proportion of Indigenous students;
- be situated more often in remote areas;
- be smaller;
- have lower scores on the Index of Relative Socio Economic Disadvantage (indicating more disadvantage); and
- have higher low attendee proportions and lower attendance rates

when compared with the primary schools that were not selected (Table 14).

Table 14 Characteristics of schools, selected vs non-selected primary schools with full-time enrolment>100

	Mean % Indigenous	Mean IRSD	Mean Remote %	Mean Full-time Enrolments	Mean Low Attendees Proportion in %	Mean Attendance rate 2008 in %
Selected (n=17)	24	951	18	297	18	91
Not selected (n=628)	10	973	5	462	12	93
Total (n=645)	10	972	5	457	12	93

The same comparison undertaken for secondary schools uncovers differences in school size with the selected secondary schools, on average, being smaller than the non-selected schools (Table 15).

Table 15 Characteristics of schools, selected vs non-selected secondary schools with full-time enrolment>100

	Mean % Indigenous	Mean IRSD	Mean Remote %	Mean Full-time Enrolments	Mean Low Attendees Proportion in %	Mean Attendance rate 2008 in %
Selected (n=33)	9	968	9	671	31	87
Not selected (n=181)	9	971	8	827	28	88
Total (n=214)	9	971	8	802	28	87

The selection of the secondary schools appears to represent well the characteristics of the entire secondary school population in terms of attendance and other characteristics, while the selection of the 17 primary schools generated a pool of schools that appears to be somewhat more disadvantaged in relation to characteristics relevant for attendance when compared with the non-selected schools.

3.4.2 Similarities and differences among selected schools

Cluster Analysis was performed on the 17 selected primary schools and the 33 selected secondary schools to investigate patterns of similarities and dissimilarities between the selected schools and to group similar schools together. The attendance rate in 2008 and the quantitative characteristics most associated with school attendance in regression modelling in Section 3.2 (Indigenous density and IRSD score) were included in the cluster analyses. Based on the dendrogram output of cluster trees and a consideration of the number of schools included, k-means cluster analyses for three groups were performed, one for the 17 primary schools and one for the 33 secondary schools.

For both primary (Table 16) and secondary (Table 17) schools, the largest group clustered features characteristics associated with relatively low disadvantage (high IRSD scores and low Indigenous density) and relatively positive attendance outcomes (small low attendee proportions and high attendance rates).

A second group clustered has the fewest members (n=3 for primary and n=2 for secondary schools) and is characterised by higher socio-economic disadvantage that corresponds with lower school attendance outcomes. A third group lies in between the two in terms of their characteristics and attendance (with the exception of the average IRSD score for primary schools).

Table 16 Clusters within selected primary schools

	Average Full-time Enrolments	Average Indigenous Proportion %	Average IRSD	Average Low Attendees %	Average Attendance rate 2008 %	Average Attendance rate 2015	Average % Remote
Primary A (n=8)	320	8.4	954	11	93	93	0
Primary B (n=6)	287	30.3	961	22	90	93	50
Primary C (n=3)	254	55.1	922	29	88	90	0
Total (n=17)	297	24	951	18	91	93	18

Table 17 Clusters within selected secondary schools

	Average Full-time Enrolments	Average Indigenous Proportion %	Average IRSD	Average Low Attendees %	Average Attendance rate 2008 %	Average Attendance rate 2015	Average % Remote
Secondary A (n=19)	705	6	989	24.5	89	91	11
Secondary B (n=12)	655	10	958	40	84	89	8
Secondary C DA (n=2)	446	31	833	43	82	86	0
Total (n=33)	671	9	968	31	87	90	9

The location of the 50 selected schools in Queensland is shown on the map in Figure 22. Primary, secondary and combined schools are represented by different symbols. The colour scheme indicates the attendance rate category in 2015, the red colour scheme for primary schools and the blue colour scheme for secondary schools. The colour reveals on which basis a combined school was selected for the project.

Figure 22 Map of 50 selected schools for DET Attendance Project
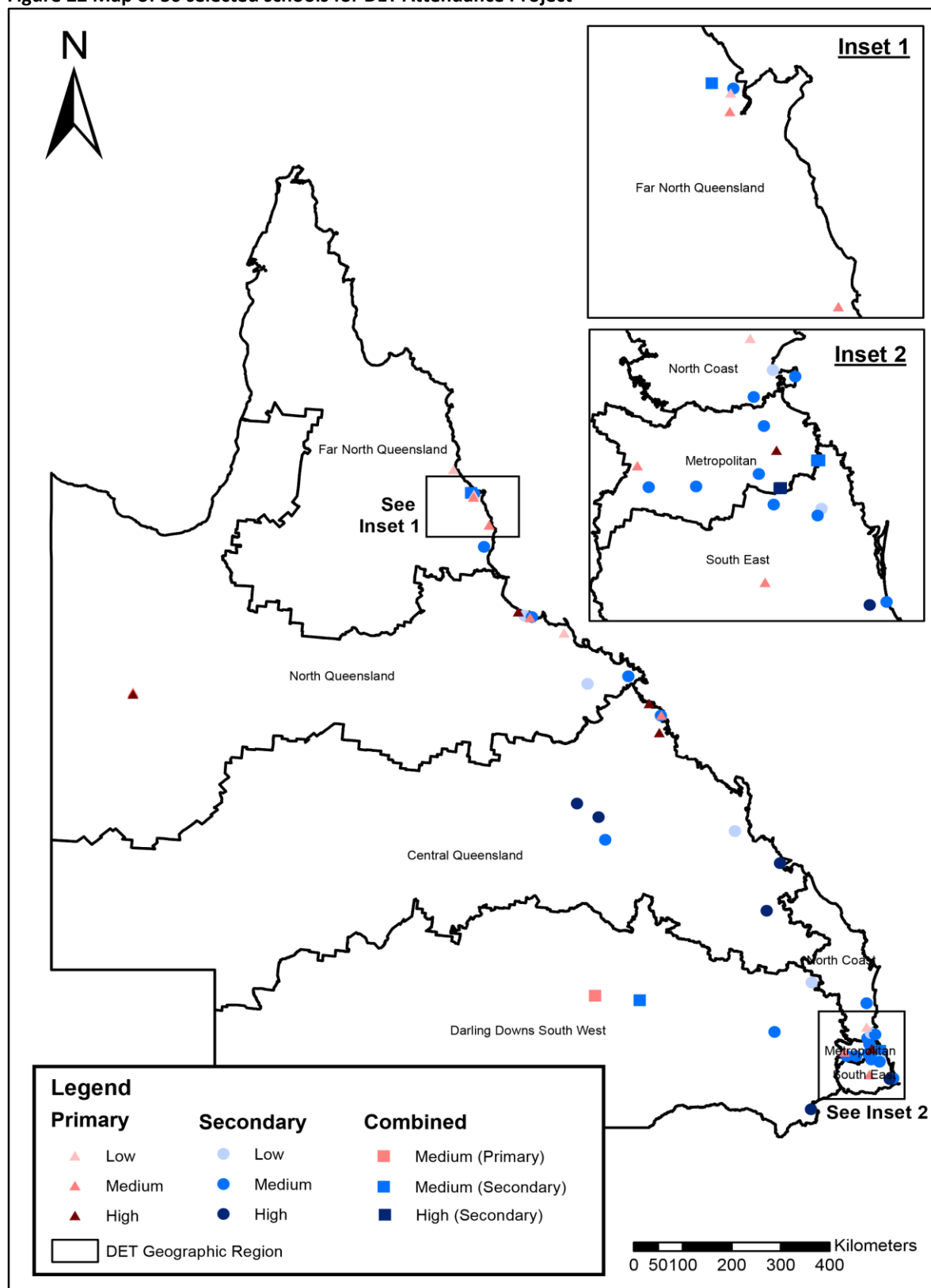
The low, mid and high categories were defined using the interquartile range of primary schools' and secondary schools' (with FTE>50) attendance rates in 2015.
Primary schools - low: <91.2% (about 25% of primary schools in 2015); medium: 91.2% to 93.8% (about 50% of primary schools in 2015); high: >93.8% (about 25% of primary schools in 2015).
Secondary schools - low: <88.0% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2015); medium: 88.0% to 90.8% (about 50% of secondary schools in 2015); high: >90.8% (about 25% of secondary schools in 2015).
The primary school with a high attendance rate in the west of North Qld obscures another nearby primary school with medium attendance rate.

53

3.5 Summary

3.5.1 Queensland in the Australian context, 2015

Queensland's attendance rate for Years 1 to 10 state school students in 2015 (91.6%) was in line with most other states and the Australian total (92.0%). The Northern Territory had the lowest rate with 81.6%. Attendance rates for state schools decreased from Years 7 to 10 in Queensland and the rest of Australia. About three in four students in Queensland (73%) had an attendance rate of 90% or higher (75% in Australia excluding NSW). This attendance level was lowest in the NT (50%).

Attendance rates and attendance level were lower for Indigenous students in all jurisdictions. The difference between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous rates were larger for year levels 7 to 10. The attendance gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students was less pronounced in Queensland than Australia overall, and highest in the NT.

The relationship between Indigenous status and school attendance is reflected at the aggregate level: the larger a jurisdiction's number of Indigenous people as a proportion of its whole population, the lower the jurisdiction's school attendance tends to be.

Furthermore, the more remote the region where a school is located, the lower the attendance rate and the attendance level tended to be. This relationship was less pronounced in Queensland than in the rest of Australia, the latter is likely influenced by the remoteness characteristics and attendance rates in the Northern Territory.

3.5.2 Attendance in Queensland schools

Attendance level (low attendee proportion) and attendance rate were highly correlated in Queensland state schools in 2008. The higher the proportion of low attendee students at a school, the lower the school's attendance rate tended to be. This very similarly applied to primary (R squared=0.91) and secondary schools (R squared=0.88).

The analysis in this report suggests accumulative disadvantages for schools' attendance rates emanate from higher Indigenous proportions of student populations, lower IRSD scores of the area in which schools are situated, and being located in a Remote area.

Secondary schools (with a full-time enrolment of over 50 students in 2008) in Queensland tended to improve their attendance rates between 2008 and 2015, while primary schools (with a full-time enrolment of over 50 students in 2008), collectively, showed a slight decline in the attendance rate

over the same period. The latter did not apply to primary schools in Remote areas for which low school attendance rates decreased between 2010 and 2015. Attendance rates between 2013 and 2015 generally increased for primary as well as for secondary schools across all regions and remoteness categories.

3.5.3 Selected schools for qualitative research

The selection mechanism applied by DET to select the 50 schools for the qualitative component of the School Attendance Project excluded smaller schools (with a full-time enrolment<=100) and schools with a declining trend in attendance rates, particularly towards the end of the period ending in 2015. The latter affected the selection of primary schools as some clusters of primary schools showed declining trends in attendance rates, from high to medium or medium to low attendance rates.

When only schools with a full-time enrolment of more than 100 students are considered, the selected 33 secondary schools for the qualitative component of the School Attendance Project are a good representation of all state secondary schools in key characteristics that are relevant for attendance. Applying the same filter when comparing the selected primary with non-selected primary schools, the 17 selected primary schools feature somewhat more disadvantaged characteristics relevant for attendance.

The selected primary as well as secondary schools were clustered into groups distinguished by different degrees of characteristics of disadvantage. This was used to inform the qualitative component of the project, when selecting schools from the pool of 50 for further in-depth research.

3.5.4 Limitations and further research opportunities

The analysis concerning relationships with school attendance in Queensland, which was presented in sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 relied on information pertaining to 2008. Some of these relationships may differ in 2017.

The analysis of attendance trends in section 3.3.3 could not consider parallel trends in school characteristics, which could plausibly be related to attendance trends (e.g. changes in Indigenous proportions and/or school size). An analysis of trends that takes account of changes in school characteristics as well as parameters of school management over the relevant period could add insights into the factors that affect changes in school attendance rates.

Another promising extension to the work in this report, and subject to the quality of this information, could be to consider the reasons for non-attendance when investigating attendance trends.

Chapter 4.   Principals' Survey on School Attendance 2015

4.1   Introduction

This chapter presents results from a survey of school leaders (mostly principals) that sought perceptions on school attendance, and was conducted by the Department in April-May 2015. Results from the survey were reported in one of DET's Performance Insights reports, which can be downloaded from this site https://det.qld.gov.au/publications/management-and-frameworks/evidence-framework/sources-of-evidence/data-analysis. The survey was implemented online and was completed by 157 school leaders out of 300 invited school leaders (for more detail about the methodology see the above mentioned Performance Insights report).

The Performance Insights report identified the main individual causes for non-attendance of poor attendance students most often perceived, the individual strategies that were most often reported and those seen as most effective by participating school leaders. It identified patterns of perceived causes for non-attendance, different uses and the perceived effect of strategies between primary and secondary schools, and between low attendance and high attendance schools.

The analysis presented in this chapter complements the presentation in the Performance Insights report. This is achieved by adding four analysis components to the existing reporting. The first component is a brief investigation into the representativeness of the participating schools using the available data from the earlier chapter. Schools who participated in the survey were indicated in the school attendance data so that some of their characteristics could be compared with non-participating schools. The second component consists of an analysis of responses to a battery of questions with general character, which were posed at the beginning of the survey and which had been considered only marginally in the Performance Insights report. The third component develops an additional view of the perceived main causes of non-attendance for poor attendance students, and the fourth component, similarly, presents an additional perspective on responses about attendance strategies.

The Performance Insights report focused on the results for individual question items included in the survey and explored differences among schools based on their type (primary vs secondary) and attendance profile (low vs high attendance rate).

The approach taken here attempts to add to the existing insights by looking for patterns of perceiving causes of non-attendance and applying strategies that are rooted in a somewhat

broader conceptual landscape. To this end, the latter two additional components of data analysis entailed categorising individual question items on an ad hoc basis. This process was constrained by the information captured in the survey and was undertaken collectively by the project team combining members from the School of Education and ISSR. Despite this, the categorisation will (more than other analysis steps) be subject to subjectivity and should be seen as heuristic in nature.

The analysis in this chapter investigates differences between school type and low versus high attendance schools as was undertaken in the Performance Insights report. Like in the earlier chapter, low and high attendance is specific to school type. As secondary schools have, on average, lower attendance rates than primary schools, the low versus high attendance categories for secondary schools use different attendance rate cut offs than the equivalent categories used for primary schools. Reported differences between low and high attendance schools therefore do not express an underlying difference between primary and secondary schools. They will rather tend to present differences between low and high attendance schools that apply to both of these school types. This is because the number of primary and secondary schools in either the high or low attendance category is so low that significant differences between low and high attendance schools at the overall level will tend to necessitate differences at the disaggregated level of primary as well as secondary schools although these may not emerge at a statistically significant level at these disaggregated levels.

4.2 Representativeness of responding schools

Using the school attendance data reported on in the previous chapter (in which combined schools are included with one record for primary and one record for the secondary school component), the way in which the 157 schools that participated in the survey represented the school population was investigated. Fifteen of the 157 schools were combined schools. For the purpose of this investigation, these 15 schools were consistent with the structure of the dataset used in the previous chapter, treated as 30 schools with school characteristics pertaining to each, their primary and secondary school segments respectively.

On this basis, participating schools were more likely to be secondary schools (32%) when compared with non-participating schools of which 19% were secondary schools.

Compared with non-participating primary schools, participating primary schools:

- had a slightly lower attendance rate in 2015 (91.4% vs 92.5%);

- had a significantly higher Indigenous proportion of students (17.6% vs 9.5%);

- were situated in areas with significantly higher socioeconomic disadvantage (IRSD score of 947 vs 972);

- had very similar average sized student populations (N~310); and

- were equally likely to be situated in remote areas (~15%).

Compared with non-participating secondary schools, participating secondary schools:

- had a slightly lower attendance rate in 2015 (86.2% vs 88.7%);

- had a significantly higher Indigenous proportion of students (20.0% vs 10.9%);

- were situated in areas with significantly higher socioeconomic disadvantage (IRSD score of 937 vs 965);

- had very similar average sized student populations (N~660); and

- were equally likely to be situated in remote areas (~17.5%).

Overall then, the participating schools reflected the school population well with a slight over-representation of disadvantaged school characteristics, which was suitable for the topic of the survey.

While representativeness of school characteristics is a valid consideration for interpreting survey results, perceived causes for non-attendance, the use of particular school attendance strategies, and perceptions about their effectiveness (the main focus of the survey), are likely also dependent on school leaders' personal and professional attributes – their education, experiences and ideological dispositions. The representativeness of the responding school leaders in this regard cannot be assessed.

4.3 General perceptions about school attendance

Survey respondents were asked to respond with an agreement rating to a battery of 12 questions about their school's handling of attendance.

Exploratory factor analysis of responses to the 12 questions revealed that responses were correlated with two factors. The below eight question items correlated with the first factor:

Q4. I have a strong understanding of the strategies needed to improve attendance at this school
Q5. The strategies used by this school are helping achieve our school's attendance targets
Q10. Attendance is monitored by the Principal/ Deputy Principal/authorised officer at your school
Q11. The strategies used at this school to increase student attendance are evaluated regularly
Q12. Students with patterns of irregular attendance are easily identified and monitored
Q13. Attendance data is analysed regularly to identify trends and patterns of absenteeism
Q14. Unexplained absences are consistently followed up within three (3) days

Q15. Reports on trends and patterns of attendance are generated regularly

These items are about understanding, monitoring, analysing, reporting, evaluating and following up on absences, and perceiving the school's strategies as effective in achieving attendance targets. The questions could be seen as having a compliance character in that they appear to probe for things that schools or their leaders (survey respondents) could or even should be expected to undertake or perceive. Expressing disagreement to any of the questions could indicate non-compliance with expected attendance practices or the non-working of strategies, both of which could be seen as reflecting negatively on school leader performance. Not surprisingly then, the average agreement score for these questions was fairly high with 4.4 (between 4-'Agree' and 5-'Strongly agree'). Average scores for the eight included question items ranged from 4.1 (Reports on trends and patterns of attendance are generated regularly) to 4.7 (Attendance is monitored by the Principal/ Deputy Principal/authorised officer at your school).

There were no differences in the average scores between high and low attendance schools, but leaders of secondary schools tended to respond with higher agreement to these questions (Table 18 and Figure 23).

Table 18 Average agreement scores to compliance questions by school type

	Secondary (n=40)	Primary (n=102)	p value for difference in means^	All (n=142)~
Mean	4.6	4.3	0.002**	4.4

^ T test with unequal variances
~ Combined schools were excluded from the total.
** significant at 99% confidence level
Because responses to the eight questions were well correlated (Cronbach's alpha=0.86) the average score of the responses to the eight questions is a legitimate measure to reflect responses to the eight questions.

Figure 23 Distribution of average responses to compliance questions by school type

Mean score (Average agreement)
Original Response options 1-"Strongly disagree" to 5-"Strongly agree"
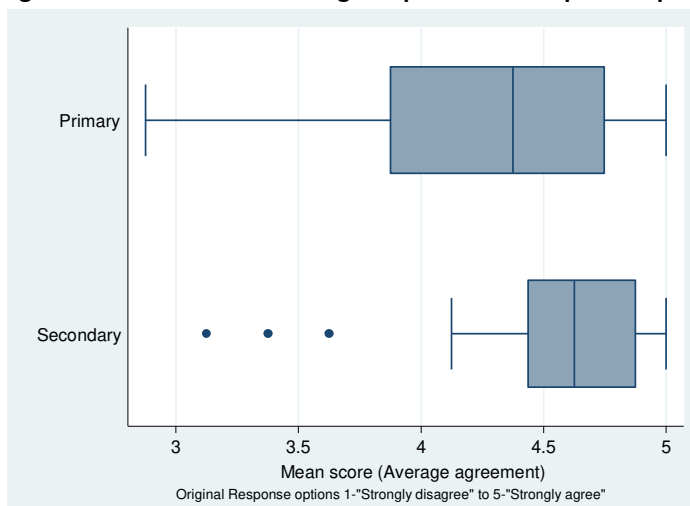
The second factor comprised the four items below:

Q6. I would welcome further guidance on how to develop strategies to improve attendance
Q7. There is sufficient support to manage persistent non-attendance
Q8 The strategies used by this school to increase attendance are well supported by the wider community
Q9. Generally, parents in this community understand the importance of sending their children to school regularly

These questions are broadly about perceptions on adequate support around attendance. Responses to the four questions were not strongly enough correlated (Cronbach's alpha=0.56) to combine them in one measure. They are therefore considered individually below.

Agreement tended to be fairly high with the statements about welcoming further guidance on developing strategies to improve attendance (mean=4.1) and the support of the wider community (mean=4.1). The agreement was somewhat lower for the statement that parents understand the importance of sending their children to school (mean=3.9), and was lowest for the statement 'There is sufficient support to manage persistent non-attendance' (mean=3.0).

There were no significant differences in the responses between school leaders from primary and secondary schools, but there were differences between leaders from high and low attendance schools. Leaders from low attendance schools tended to agree less with the statements about parents understanding the importance of sending their children to school, and there being sufficient support to manage persistent non-attendance, while more welcoming further guidance on how to develop strategies to improve attendance (Table 19).

Table 19 Average agreement score to support questions by low vs high attendance school

Support questions	Low attendance	High attendance	p value for difference in means^	All
I would welcome further guidance on how to develop strategies to improve attendance	4.4	3.9	0.006**	4.1
There is sufficient support to manage persistent non-attendance	2.8	3.3	0.001**	3.0
The strategies used by this school to increase attendance are well supported by the wider community	4.0	4.2	0.165	4.1
Generally, parents in this community understand the importance of sending their children to school regularly	3.6	4.2	0.000**	3.9

^T test with unequal variances.
** significant at 99% confidence level.

4.4 Perceived main causes of non-attendance for students with history of poor attendance

Respondents to the survey were asked to select the top five causes of non-attendance for students with a history of poor attendance. The project team grouped the relevant 16 items into three categories expressing the realm in which a cause potentially fell from the point of view of a school leader who responded to the question 'In your opinion, what are the five main causes of non-attendance at this school…' (Table 20).

Table 20 Perceived causes of non-attendance categorised

Perceived causes of non-attendance	Realm
Cultural reasons (e.g. Religious holidays, 'Sorry Business')	Family/household
Distance required to travel to school	Family/household
Family holiday	Family/household
Family issues (e.g. illness of carer, financial hardship)	Family/household
Parent apathy	Family/household
Bullying by other students	School's responsibility
Conflict with other students	School's responsibility
Conflict with teachers	School's responsibility
Lack of varied curriculum	School's responsibility
Avoidance of particular school activities (e.g. sports carnivals, excursions)	Student decision making/wellbeing
Student avoidance of school assessments	Student decision making/wellbeing
Student disengagement	Student decision making/wellbeing
Student part time work commitments	Student decision making/wellbeing
Student refusal	Student decision making/wellbeing
Student illness	Student decision making/wellbeing
Student mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression)	Student decision making/wellbeing

The three categories are listed in Table 21. The table also shows the number of respondents who selected at least one of the items falling into a category.

School leaders mainly selected items falling under the realm of student well-being/decision making or the realm of the student's family or household context. Ninety-eight percent of respondents selected at least one item under the family/household category and 96% selected a minimum of one item under the student realm category.

The number of items falling under each of the three categories is given in brackets next to each category. This is informative because, other things being equal, the more items fall into a category the more likely a respondent should select a response that falls under the category. Including this information adds more relative importance to the realm of a student's family or household because respondents were more likely to select one of five items than selecting one of seven items under the realm of student well-being or decision making.

The prevalence of selecting an item under the realm of the school's responsibility was very low. Only four of the 156 respondents to the question selected one of the four items falling under this category.

Table 21 Realm of perceived causes for non-attendance

	n~	Percent of cases^
Realm of student's family or household (five items)	153	98
Realm of student well-being or decision making (seven items)	149	96
Realm of school's responsibility (four items)	6	4

^ Based on 156 respondents (one respondent did not select a single option).

There was a modest negative correlation between the selected number of student items and the selected number of family items – a tendency to select less items under one of the dimensions the more items were selected under the other.

Leaders from secondary schools tended to select more items that fell under the realm of the student and less items under the realm of the student's family/household when compared with leaders from primary schools. The distribution of the number of items selected by primary and secondary school leaders is displayed in Figure 24 and Figure 25.

Figure 24 Realm of student responses by school type
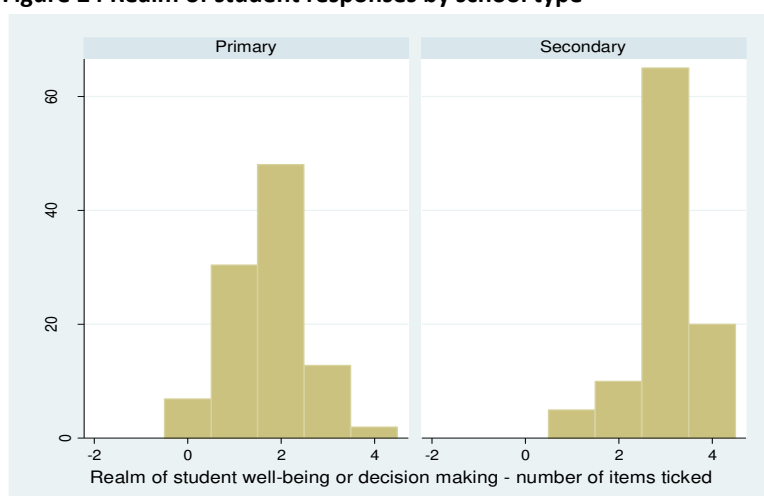
Figure 25 Realm of family responses by school type
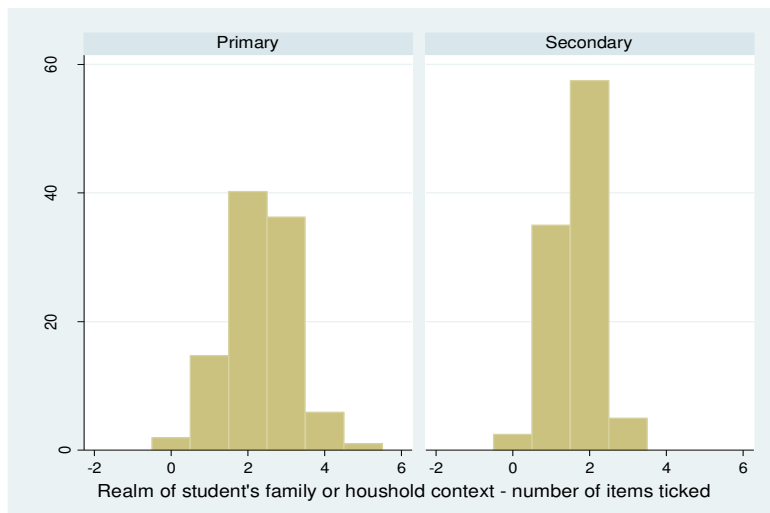
Within the student realm, two dimensions could be considered: involuntary and voluntary student absenteeism (Table 22).

Table 22 Causes under student realm by voluntary/involuntary absenteeism

Items	Voluntary/involuntary
Avoidance of particular school activities (e.g. sports carnivals, excursions)	Voluntary
Student avoidance of school assessments	Voluntary
Student disengagement	Voluntary
Student part time work commitments	Voluntary
Student refusal	Voluntary
Student illness	Involuntary
Student mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression)	Involuntary

When the two dimensions are considered separately, it emerges that leaders from secondary schools (95%) were significantly more likely to nominate a cause that fell under the voluntary dimension of non-attendance than leaders from primary schools (62%) while the probability of nominating an item falling under the involuntary dimension was not significantly different (both around 79%). The same pattern applied to leaders of low attendance schools when compared with leaders of high attendance schools.

Further, secondary school leaders tended to nominate more items that fell under the voluntary dimension. Respondents from secondary schools also tended to nominate more items falling under the involuntary dimension but the difference with primary school respondents fell below the 95% significant threshold (Table 23).

Table 23 Average number of voluntary and involuntary student realm items selected by school type

Cause of absence in realm of student	Primary	Secondary	p value for difference in means^	All~
Voluntary	0.8	1.9	0.000**	1.1
Involuntary	0.9	1.2	0.079	1.0

^T test with unequal variances.
~ Combined schools were excluded from the total.
** significant at 99% confidence level

Leaders from low attendance schools collectively also selected more items under the voluntary absence category than leaders from high attendance schools, which, perhaps interestingly, coincided with low attendance school leaders selecting less items from the involuntary absence category than leaders from high attendance schools (Table 24).

Table 24 Average number of student realm items selected by low vs high attendance school

Cause of absence in realm of student	Low attendance	High attendance	p value for difference in means^	All
Voluntary	1.4	0.9	0.000**	1.2
Involuntary	0.8	1.1	0.030*	1.0

^T test with unequal variances.
*significant at 95% confidence level
** significant at 99% confidence level

Table 25 lists all of the 16 individual causes against the percentage by which primary, secondary, low attendance and high attendance schools selected the individual item. Items are organised according to the four realms described above, which emphasises the pattern of differences between the respective school categories. For example, the table makes apparent that secondary school leaders were less likely to nominate four out of five possible causes under the realm of the family/household than primary school leaders while they were more likely to select four out of five items under the realm of student voluntary absence than their primary school peers. The starkest differences between low and high attendance schools lie in leaders from low attendance schools perceiving more negative causes for non-attendance of poor attendance students than high attendance school leaders: leaders of the former schools were more than 20 percentage points more likely to select the causes 'Family issues (e.g. illness of carer, financial hardship)', 'Parent apathy', 'Student refusal' and 'Student disengagement'.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, when surveys are implemented in a work context and survey questions have the potential to be seen as probing for performance by respondents to the survey, the resulting responses will likely be affected by it, with a high level of compliance or success

indicated. This may also have influenced responses to the questions categorised under the realm of school responsibility.

Table 25 Perceived causes of non-attendance by school type and low vs high attendance school, percent

Realm of the family/household	Primary %	Secondary %	Low attendance %	High attendance %
Family holiday	70	25	39	70
Family issues (e.g. illness of carer, financial hardship)	66	57	75	53
Parent apathy	62	63	75	53
Cultural reasons (e.g. Religious holidays, 'Sorry Business')	26	17	27	23
Distance required to travel to school	9	3	5	10
Realm of school responsibility				
Conflict with other students	1	10	5	1
Lack of varied curriculum	1	0	0	1
Bullying by other students	0	0	0	0
Conflict with teachers	0	0	0	0
Realm of voluntary student absence				
Avoidance of particular school activities (e.g. sports carnivals, excursions)	30	42	34	32
Student refusal	28	70	52	29
Student disengagement	15	57	46	17
Student avoidance of school assessments	8	15	10	12
Student part time work commitments	0	0	1	0
Realm of involuntary student absence				
Student illness	67	53	51	73
Student mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression)	25	63	34	34

4.5 Attendance strategies

4.5.1 The administration of attendance

Respondents were asked to indicate which of a number of strategies their school had used, and if so, what the impact was on student attendance. For offering additional insights to the results in the Performance Insights report, the strategies were categorised according to an ad hoc conceptualised administration cycle that consists of the below stages:

- Capture attendance information;
- Investigate attendance patterns;
- Design attendance policy;
- Preventative/general strategies;
- General responses to non-attendance; and
- Responses to poor attendance.

The categorisation process transcended the structure of the questionnaire. The allocation of items to categories is shown in Appendix – Categorisation of attendance strategies.

Leaders of secondary schools were significantly more likely to indicate a larger number of strategies that their schools had used under the categories of capturing attendance information, preventative/general strategies, general responses to non-attendance and responses to poor attendance (Table 26).

Table 26 Average number of strategies by stage in administration cycle and school type

Stage in admin cycle	Primary	Secondary	p value for difference in means^	All~
Capture attendance information	2.0	2.7	0.000**	2.2
Investigate attendance patterns	1.8	1.8	0.325	1.8
Design attendance policy	1.2	1.3	0.352	1.2
Preventative/general strategies	12.9	14.2	0.006**	13.3
General responses to non-attendance	3.5	5.6	0.000**	4.1
Responses to poor attendance	3.4	6.5	0.000**	4.3

^T test with unequal variances.
~ Combined schools were excluded from the total.
** significant at 99% confidence level.

Leaders from low attendance schools were also significantly more likely to indicate a larger number of strategies their schools had used under the latter three categories as well as under the category design attendance policy (Table 27).

Table 27 Average number of strategies by stage in administration cycle and low vs high attendance school

Stage in admin cycle	Low attendance	High attendance	p value for difference in means^	All
Capture attendance information	2.3	2.1	0.184	2.2
Investigate attendance patterns	1.8	1.8	0.638	1.8
Design attendance policy	1.4	1.0	0.005**	1.2
Preventative/general strategies	14.2	12.6	0.001**	13.4
General responses to non-attendance	4.6	3.6	0.000**	4.1
Responses to poor attendance	5.0	3.8	0.000**	4.4

^T test with unequal variances.
** significant at 99% confidence level.

4.5.2 Target groups for attendance strategies

A second dimension of strategies was categorised for strategies falling under the categories preventative/general, general responses to non-attendance, and responses to poor attendance. These are the strategies aiming at making a difference by targeting particular groups with some intervention. To investigate whether there were different patterns in terms of the target groups of

used strategies, strategies were categorised based on the group they targeted (see Appendix – Categorisation of attendance strategies).

Leaders of secondary schools were more likely to indicate a larger number of strategies that targeted students and a larger number of strategies that targeted parents when compared with leaders of primary schools (Table 28).

Table 28 Average number of strategies by target group of strategy and school type

Target group	Primary	Secondary	p value for difference in means^	All~
Targeted students	10.2	14.2	0.000**	11.4
Targeted parents	9.1	11.3	0.000**	9.7
Targeted business	0.5	0.7	0.061	0.5

^T test with unequal variances.
~ Combined schools were excluded from the total.
** significant at 99% confidence level.

Leaders of low attendance schools were more likely to indicate a larger number of strategies that targeted all three groups – students, parents and local business – than leaders of high attendance schools (Table 29).

Table 29 Average number of strategies by target group of strategy and low vs high attendance school

Target group	Low attendance	High attendance	p value for difference in means^	All
Targeted students	12.7	10.4	0.000**	11.6
Targeted parents	10.4	9.3	0.002**	9.8
Targeted business	0.8	0.3	0.000**	0.6

^T test with unequal variances.
** significant at 99% confidence level.

4.5.3 Nature of attendance strategies

Preventative/general strategies, general response to non-attendance strategies and responses to poor attendance strategies were then categorised based on the content/nature of the strategy (see Appendix – Categorisation of attendance strategies). This process was perhaps the most subjective of all categorisations undertaken here. To minimise the subjectivity, question items were not categorised when the nature of the associated strategy was not clear or did not obviously fit into the emerging categories. Four categories emerged from the process:

- Communicating the importance of attendance;
- Improving the attractiveness of school for students;
- Supporting/building student capabilities; and
- Controlling/punitive measures (Appendix 1).

Communicating the importance of attendance, and improving a school's attractiveness for students are categories of strategies belonging to the preventative/general strategy class. Supportive/capability building strategies came from all three classes of attendance strategies considered here.

Controlling/punitive strategies were sourced from the general strategies responding to non-attendance and strategies responding to poor attendance classes. This category contrasts, in particular, with the categories for improving the attractiveness of school and supporting/building capability in students. There is some affinity of these categories with the categorisation of attendance strategies in connective, incentives and sanctions based strategies as referred to in another of DET's Performance Insights report (DET, 2013, Performance Insights: School Attendance, p33f, http:/education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/docs/ performance-insights-report.pdf).

Leaders of secondary schools were more likely to indicate a larger number of strategies across all three of these categories – those aiming at making the school more attractive for students, those aiming at supporting students and/or building their capabilities, and those of a controlling/punitive character (Table 30). The difference in the number of controlling/punitive strategies used by secondary schools when compared with primary schools is particularly large.

Table 30 Average number of strategies by nature of strategy and school type

Nature of strategy	Primary	Secondary	p value for difference in means^	All~
Communicating importance of attendance	5.3	5.1	0.416	5.2
Improve attractiveness of school	2.4	2.8	0.044*	2.5
Supportive/capability building	4.8	6.5	0.000**	5.3
Controlling/punitive	2.4	5.6	0.000**	3.3

^T test with unequal variances.
~ Combined schools were excluded from the total.
*significant at 95% confidence level.
** significant at 99% confidence level.

Leaders of low attendance schools were more likely to nominate a larger number of strategies their schools had used across all four categories (Table 31).

Table 31 Average number of strategies by nature of strategy and low vs high attendance school

Nature of strategy	Low attendance	High attendance	p value for difference in means^	All
Communicating importance of attendance	5.5	5.1	0.021*	5.3
Improve attractiveness of school	2.8	2.2	0.001**	2.5
Supportive/capability building	5.9	4.7	0.001**	5.3
Controlling/punitive	4.1	2.8	0.000**	3.4

^T test with unequal variances.
*significant at 95% confidence level.
** significant at 99% confidence level.

A more detailed look at the way leaders from primary and secondary schools differed in their responses about attendance strategies is provided in Table 32. The table presents the percentage of leaders who indicated to have used an individual strategy under the three categories controlling/punitive, supportive/capability building and improvement of attractiveness of school, and the percentage of school leaders who indicated to have used a strategy with a minimum of 'slight impact'. The strategies are listed under the broader category heading and within that arrangement are sorted according to the % used with impact score for secondary schools. Eighty-seven percent of secondary school leaders (who responded to the question) indicated that their schools had used the strategy 'implementation of disciplinary actions' with impact, which was the highest percentage among the controlling/punitive categories. All responding secondary school leaders (100%) noted that referring poor attendance students to school support staff was a strategy that was used with at least slight impact. Comparing results from secondary with primary schools at the level of these individual strategies confirms the earlier impression that secondary schools applied more strategies that reflected different approaches, those of a controlling/punitive character as well as those that aimed at creating a positive change in the school environment or the students. The table additionally informs that secondary school leaders were not only more likely to indicate the use of varied strategies, but that they were also more likely to indicate an impact from using strategies that fall under different approaches. Strategies aimed at supporting students or building their capability were particularly seen as having an impact. Roughly between nine and 10 secondary school leaders expressed an impact on attendance from six out of seven supporting/capability building strategies.

Table 32 Controlling, improving and supporting strategies used and used with impact, by school type

	Prim % used	Sec	Prim % used with impact	Sec
Controlling/punitive strategies				
Implementation of disciplinary actions (e.g. detention for truancy)	8%	92%	5%	87%
Letters advising parents of their legal obligations for student attendance	66%	90%	45%	82%
Discourage families from taking holidays during the school term	83%	89%	39%	66%
Development and implementation of 'Individual Attendance Improvement Plans' for students	17%	64%	16%	64%
Undertaking formal agreements with parents on student attendance	22%	57%	19%	57%
Truancy sweeps by school staff (e.g. random visits to shops or skate parks)	9%	59%	6%	49%
Initiation of a prosecution process of parents who continue to neglect their legal obligations for student attendance	20%	72%	11%	41%
Collaboration with local businesses (e.g. students are not to be served during school hours)	13%	53%	12%	40%
Improving attractiveness of school				
Planned activities during lunch breaks that students look forward to	70%	88%	53%	80%
Scheduling events and activities on days that have traditionally poor attendance	65%	79%	57%	74%
Extra-curricular activities offered to students after school	59%	72%	39%	65%
Before-school activities that encourage students to get to school on time	48%	38%	36%	38%
Supporting/capability building strategies				
Referral of students with poor attendance to school support staff (e.g. guidance officer, Chaplain, Youth Support Co-ordinator)	71%	100%	63%	100%
Reward programs that recognise improved or good student attendance	78%	93%	74%	93%
Implementing targeted strategies to develop students' social/emotional skills	89%	95%	85%	92%
Implementing targeted strategies to improve student well-being (e.g. anti-bullying)	88%	97%	84%	92%
Support for students returning to school after a substantial absence	56%	97%	49%	92%
Providing support programs that respond to specific needs (e.g. uniform exchange, breakfast program, walking bus, shoe exchange)	63%	93%	56%	88%
Peer tutoring/mentoring for students	41%	82%	36%	74%

Denominators for percentages are question specific and are based on all responses to the question.
'Used with impact' was defined as 'Used-slight impact' + 'Used-moderate impact' + 'Used-significant impact'.
Items sorted within the three categories according to secondary schools % used with impact.

Similarly when this data is compiled for low vs high attendance schools, there is no evidence to suggest that low attendance schools approach school attendance narrowly (Table 33). It rather seems that they attempt to reduce their higher non-attendance by trying strategies under various

approaches, with supporting/capability strategies featuring prominently in terms of use and of perceived impact.

Table 33 Controlling, improving and supporting strategies used and used with impact, by school type

	High or Low attendance			
	High	Low	High	Low
	% used		% used with impact	
Controlling/punitive strategies				
Letters advising parents of their legal obligations for student attendance	65%	84%	46%	70%
Discourage families from taking holidays during the school term	90%	79%	45%	47%
Implementation of disciplinary actions (e.g. detention for truancy)	23%	46%	22%	39%
Development and implementation of 'Individual Attendance Improvement Plans' for students	27%	38%	26%	37%
Undertaking formal agreements with parents on student attendance	28%	38%	28%	34%
Initiation of a prosecution process of parents who continue to neglect their legal obligations for student attendance	22%	53%	11%	33%
Collaboration with local businesses (e.g. students are not to be served during school hours)	13%	35%	11%	30%
Truancy sweeps by school staff (e.g. random visits to shops or skate parks)	15%	35%	14%	27%
Improving attractiveness of school				
Scheduling events and activities on days that have traditionally poor attendance	62%	80%	57%	72%
Planned activities during lunch breaks that students look forward to	67%	83%	55%	67%
Extra-curricular activities offered to students after school	55%	71%	43%	53%
Before-school activities that encourage students to get to school on time	42%	52%	33%	44%
Supporting/capability building strategies				
Reward programs that recognise improved or good student attendance	73%	94%	69%	92%
Implementing targeted strategies to develop students' social/emotional skills	88%	94%	88%	87%
Implementing targeted strategies to improve student well-being (e.g. anti-bullying)	92%	91%	90%	85%
Referral of students with poor attendance to school support staff (e.g. guidance officer, Chaplain, Youth Support Co-ordinator)	72%	89%	66%	82%
Providing support programs that respond to specific needs (e.g. uniform exchange, breakfast program, walking bus, shoe exchange)	55%	89%	51%	80%
Support for students returning to school after a substantial absence	57%	78%	51%	71%
Peer tutoring/mentoring for students	47%	59%	46%	49%

Denominators for percentages are question specific and are based on all responses to the question.
'Used with impact' was defined as 'Used-slight impact' + 'Used-moderate impact' + 'Used-significant impact'.
Items sorted within the three categories according to low attendance schools % used with impact.

There are a number of correlations between school leader responses across various areas. For example, the more school leaders selected items falling under the realm of voluntary student behaviour when asked about the main causes of non-attendance for students with a history of poor attendance, the more they tended to:

- select strategies they had used responding to non-attendance (r=0.48);
- select strategies they had used for responding to poor attendance (r=0.44);
- select strategies that they had used and that targeted parents (r=0.41) (such a correlation does not exist between perceptions about family/household realm as main cause for non-attendance and targeting parents with strategies);
- select strategies they had used targeting students (r=0.39);
- select strategies they had used that were of a controlling/punitive nature (r=0.49);
- select strategies they had used that were of a supportive/capability building nature (this correlation is weaker than the one above, r=0.30); and
- agree with welcoming further guidance on how to develop strategies to improve attendance (0.31).

The relationship between the selected number of controlling/punitive strategies and the selected number of causes for non-attendance that fall into the realm of student voluntary behaviour is illustrated in Figure 26. To make it more apparent where the median scores lie, they are indicated by a red triangle. The median score of the selected number of controlling/punitive strategies increases with the number of selected causes under the realm of student voluntary absence.

Figure 26 Number of controlling/punitive strategies by number of causes for non-attendance in the realm of student voluntary behaviour
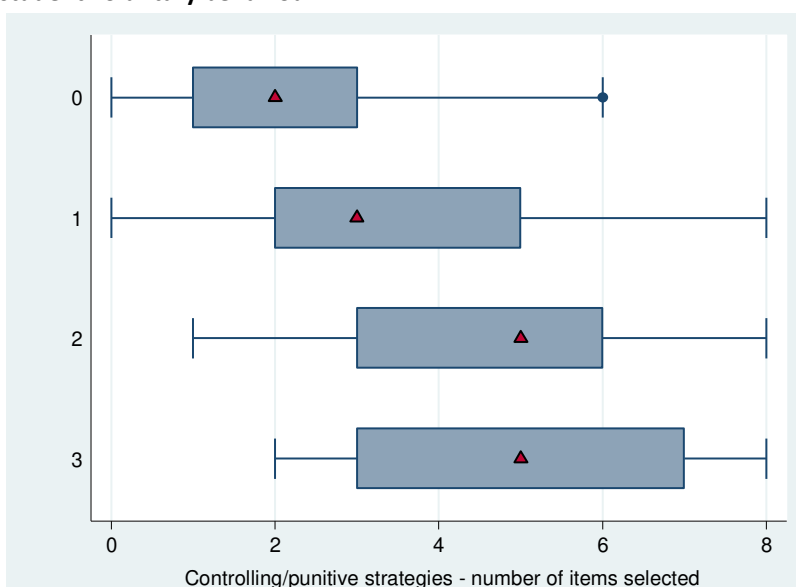
The number of respondents is too small for identifying how these associations play out when type as well as attendance profile of the associated schools are taken into account. But Figure 27, which displays the relationship shown in Figure 26 for high attendance schools only, leaves the possibility open that school type and attendance profile may not account for all associations between various school leader perceptions, as the overall pattern of the relationship in Figure 26 is still maintained within this selected sub-group.

Figure 27 Number of controlling/punitive strategies by number of causes for non-attendance in the realm of student voluntary behaviour, high attendance schools
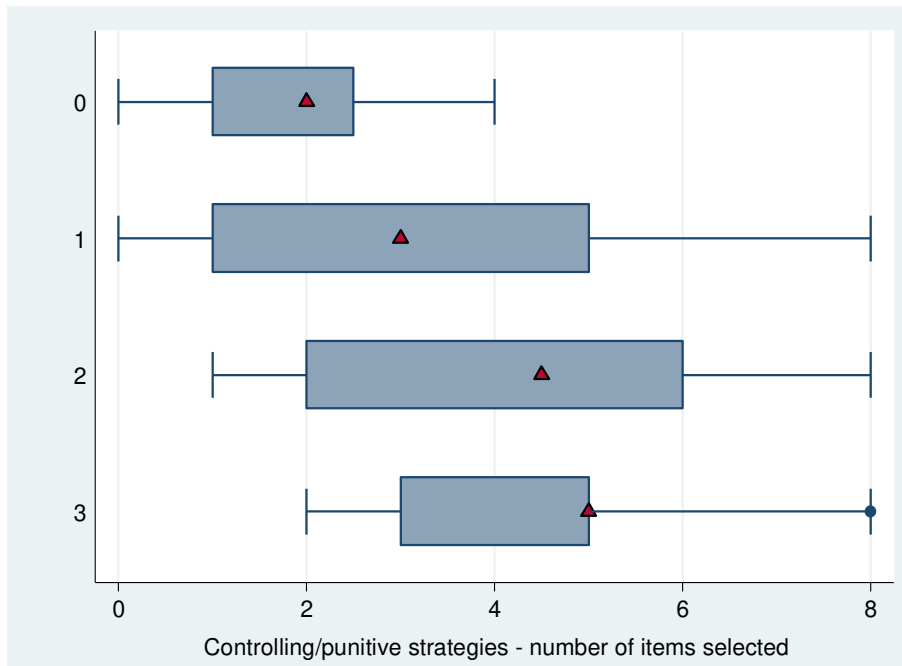
This possibility is further made plausible by an example of an individual strategy under the controlling/punitive category. The more items school leaders of low and high attendance schools selected under the student voluntary realm for explaining causes of non-attendance the more likely school leaders tended to report that disciplinary actions had not only been used but also that they had an impact (Figure 28).

Figure 28 Probability of reporting an impact from 'Implementation of disciplinary action' by number of causes for non-attendance in the realm of student voluntary behaviour by high vs low attendance schools
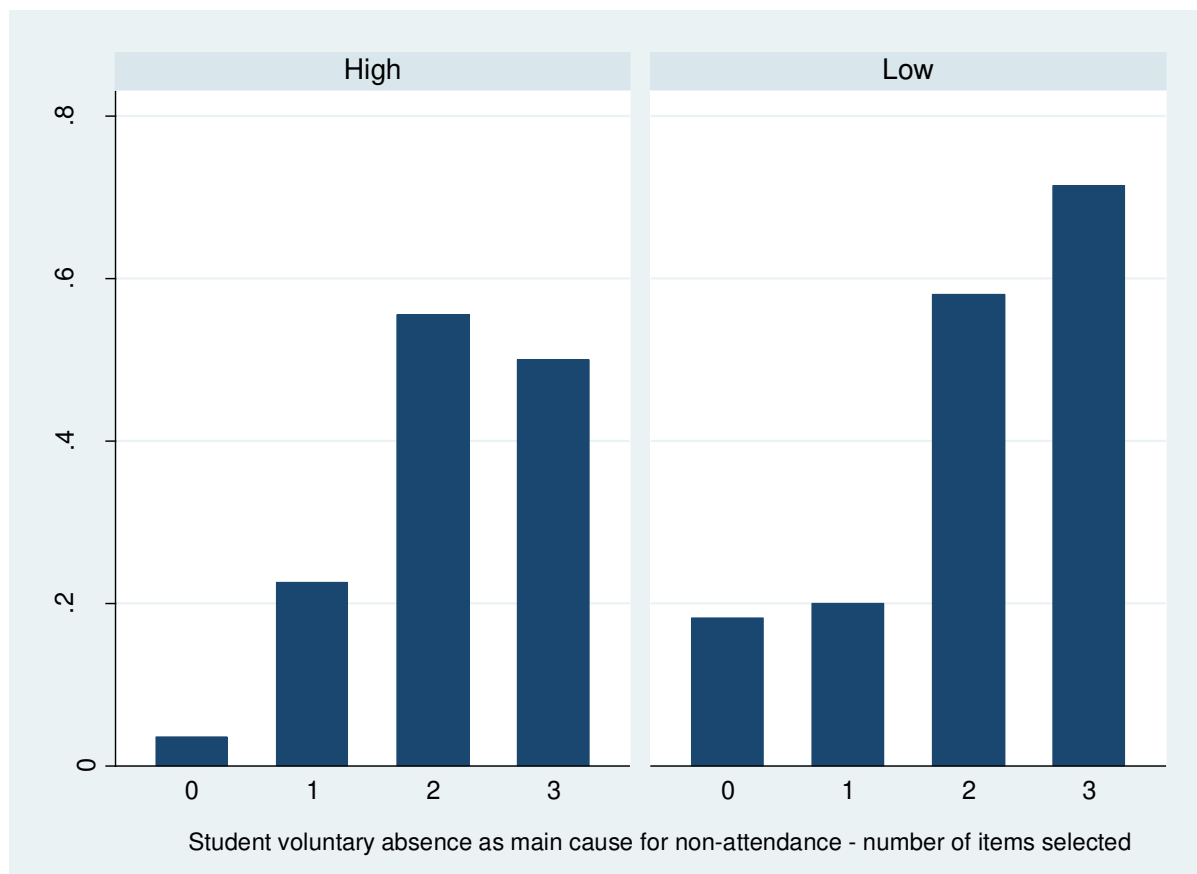
4.6 Summary

This chapter presented an analysis of responses to a school leader survey about school attendance, which was implemented online by DET in April-May 2015. The analysis complements earlier reporting of the survey results in one of DET's Performance Insights report (https://det.qld.gov.au/publications/management-and-frameworks/evidence-framework/sources-of-evidence/data-analysis).

The analysis presented in the Performance Insights report focused on individual survey items (questions). The approach taken here attempted to add to the reported insights by looking for patterns that are rooted in a slightly broader conceptual landscape. This was constrained by the existing question and questionnaire design, the scarcity of available information on characteristics of participating schools, and the modest number of 157 survey completions.

To capture broader patterns, the research team categorised question items in various ways (Appendix – Categorisation of attendance strategies). These categorisations could have been undertaken in different ways, and the categorisations developed here may not be shared by all readers in every detail. Despite this obvious shortcoming, there can be value in explorations of this

kind as they can lead to identifying patterns, further questions or ideas, and the approach taken here should be seen in this context.

Responses given under the designed categories were counted. The resulting number could then, potentially, serve as an indicator of emphasis. If school leaders select more strategies under a particular dimension, such as improving the attractiveness of a school for students, it could indicate that these leaders had put more emphasis on addressing attendance this way than leaders who selected less strategies under that category. Of course, this is not necessarily so as it is unknown to what extent individual strategies under each dimension were utilised by schools (this was not captured by the survey).

That some questions cannot be seen as exclusive but as overlapping with, or subsuming others is another, potentially significant shortcoming. This calls into question the legitimacy of counting as a tool for quantifying the use of strategies because it could have led to indicating the use of multiple strategies for the same strategy. For example, the statement 'Implementing targeted strategies to ensure students feel connected to this school' could have been seen by respondents to include more specific strategies, such as 'Extra-curricular activities offered to students after school' so that the use of the latter would also trigger the use of the former. However, this issue may be a relatively small problem because nearly all respondents (150 of 157) indicated to have used generically worded strategies such as the one above. There is thus no variation in indicating the use of the generically worded strategies as nearly all respondents selected them.

Within these constraints, the results need to be interpreted carefully. They could suggest:

- That school leaders predominantly view causes for non-attendance or poor attendance in the realm of students' families or households or the realm of the students themselves;
- That leaders from secondary schools emphasised more causes in the realm of voluntary student behaviour and less causes in the realm of students' families and households;
- Similarly, that leaders from low attendance schools emphasised more causes in the realm of voluntary student absence (in particular 'Student refusal' and 'Student disengagement', while also emphasising negative states within the family/household domain ('Family issues [e.g. illness of carer, financial hardship' and 'Parent apathy');
- That leaders from secondary and low attendance schools placed more emphasis on addressing attendance across most stages of the administration cycle surrounding attendance than their respective counterparts;

- That leaders from secondary and low attendance schools targeted students, parents as well as business with more strategies than their respective counterparts;
- That leaders from secondary and low attendance schools applied more strategies that aimed at:
  - Improving the attractiveness of their schools for students;
  - Supporting students or building their capability; and
  - Controlling or punishing students or parents

  than their respective counterparts;

- That leaders from secondary and low attendance schools were more likely to see an impact emanating from various strategies under the above three approaches;
- That leaders of low attendance schools also applied more strategies of communicating the importance of attendance to students or parents.

Altogether these results suggest that schools with lower attendance rates and schools with higher year levels are associated with a larger number of attendance strategies across many/most of the investigated dimensions. Their leaders are more likely to emphasise student voluntary absence than leaders of their respective opposites, and leaders of low attendance schools are also more likely to emphasise negative aspects in the realm of the family and household. By emphasising 'Family issues' and 'Parent apathy' (three out of four of the responding low attendance leaders selected these items among their top five reasons), school leaders of low attendance schools point to matters that may be seen as falling particularly outside the realm of schools' sphere of influence. However, leaders of low attendance and secondary schools appear to apply pluralistic approaches (those of improving, supporting as well as of controlling/punitive character) to responding to their lower attendance levels.

There were also correlations between particular sets of perceptions, between those pertaining to the causes of non-attendance, and the utilisation of attendance strategies. The data did not allow to disentangle these relationships from other relationships involving the characteristics of schools. But this kind of enquiry, which investigates ideological connections between perceptions and strategies, could be of some interest, particularly if it is undertaken in conjunction with the 'hard' data on school characteristics and attendance trends.

There was little variation in school leaders' large agreement with statements about understanding, monitoring, analysing, reporting, evaluating and following up on student absences, and perceiving

the school's strategies as effective in achieving attendance targets, although leaders from secondary schools tended to express somewhat higher agreement. These high agreements scores and the virtual absence of matters the school could be seen as responsible for among the top five selected reasons for non-attendance of poor attendee students points to the limitations of surveys that include questions that could be interpreted as performance type questions directed at responding staff of organisations, particularly if the same organisations collect the data.

Agreement scores for statements surrounding the support of attendance varied more, with the statement 'There is sufficient support to manage persistent non-attendance' attracting an average score of 3, which reflects a 'Neither agree nor disagree' response. Low attendance schools were more likely to indicate lower agreement with the support statements and a higher agreement with welcoming further guidance.

Participating schools reflected the school population in Queensland well, with a slight over-representation of disadvantaged school characteristics (Indigenous proportion, IRSD scores), which was suitable for the topic of the survey.

Chapter 5. Principal Interview Data

The 50 interviews with principals, or their representatives[5], sought to determine principals' perceptions of the causes of absenteeism and the types of responses that they have implemented to address these causes. These interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription and analysis. The transcripts of these interviews have provided exceedingly rich data. The analysis is primarily thematic; a method for encoding data through identifying patterns and themes within the interview responses. Some of these themes have been generated from the data, while others have been drawn from the review of the literature. The data have been coded into the following categories: (a) Reasons for absenteeism; (b) Addressing conditions that prevent student attendance; (c) Strategies for particular groups; (d) Making school attractive for students; (e) Monitoring students and their families; and (f) Punitive measures.

From the outset it is important to acknowledge that these principals were aware of departmental expectations and accountability regimes to ensure the best outcomes for their students and communities, but were confronting a range of issues in different locations that make maximising student attendance a challenging task. However, as these principals have been purposively selected, due to their schools demonstrating success in this area, their insights present a picture of what can be achieved in often challenging circumstances. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of context. Many of the principals were addressing circumstances that were unique to their areas and what worked for them, may well not be easily transferrable to other contexts.

The principals also discussed complexity in relation to ownership and engagement: '[involving] our whole community in terms of what we are doing, with our curriculum and with teaching and learning; so that people feel like they own the decision-making process; and then they can actually make strong agreements that they are then accountable for'. This person reflected: 'How do we find more time? How do we not overburden staff, to make it an impossible task? But when you are consultative, it does take time; it can't just happen'. Another principal noted that:

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[5] For the purposes of this section we refer to this group of participants as 'the Principals'.

I think it is really important to recognise the power of work that goes on at schools. But schools cop the raw end of the stick more often than not; and I feel that, it is about not being truly aware of the work that's going on. The burden, if you like, that we place on schools to become the 'cure all' of everything. You know, this is actually a social issue. It is about how we as a community value education. And schools alone cannot fix that problem.

However, as a group these people were highly committed and enthusiastic about supporting the young people in their care. Many of them were also extremely humble with comments such as: 'I think we have got to learn still; and we are constantly refining and trying new things'.

5.1   Reasons for absenteeism

As the literature review indicated, there are multiple causes of absenteeism, many of which are interrelated. The principal interviews reinforce the findings from the literature. The findings here are therefore shaped along the lines of the literature review in relation to contributors to absenteeism: school; life circumstances; and personal circumstances.

5.1.1 School

The literature indicates schools are a serious contributor to absenteeism through poor teacher-student and student-student relationships, including bullying, and irrelevant curricula and pedagogies within schools. However, very few principals identified school as a factor. In a number of schools there were comments that 'bullying' and an acceptance of violence by the community contributed to some students wanting to stay away from school.

However, it is apparent, as will be seen below, the principals were very well aware that there were things that they could do to improve attendance, and hence aware that what happens in schools is a factor in student attendance.

5.1.2 Life circumstances

Many of the principals were very well aware of the particular life circumstances of some students that had an impact on their ability to attend school. These factors are those that are external to the student such as socioeconomic considerations that made it difficult for some families to attend school. This was emphasised by one principal who indicated: 'if they don't have a roof over their head or food/clothing, they are not really going to be worried

about attendance at school.' This also related to some students who for various reasons had to live independently of their families. One person told us: 'Some of them actually become independent students; so, they move out of home for a whole range of reasons. Some of the factors around that have an impact on their attendance'.

As is well known, without falling into deficit constructions of people living in poverty, there are direct links between crime and poverty. At least three principals referred to young people who had parents in prison and how this impacted upon students.

Location was also a factor; many of the principals interviewed were in remote or rural areas which had specific impacts upon students' ability to attend school. One of these related to transport. In some remote areas, even having to see a doctor or attend a family commitment could lead to extra time away. In some of the areas where the schools were located, families were engaged in industries that employed fly in/fly out (FIFO) workers. This type of lifestyle also seemed to impact upon students, for example:

> Mum or dad or both, will go off and work and they work some crazy shifts out here. They will work 6 till 6 for four days and have three days off so for those shift days, often the parents are trusting the kids to do the right thing. They are leaving them with money … a well-stocked fridge; and the kids in that time, sometimes it's very difficult for them to get to school because mum and dad aren't around.

Some of these communities also have very transient populations which can affect attendance and enrolments. One principal articulated in relation to the tracking of students' data: 'It's a very transient town, so people will come and go and not deem it necessary to contact the school around their movement'.

Principals also noted that some students' family situations were significant contributors to their low attendance. There was a lot of mention of domestic violence having an impact on students, as were issues related to drug and alcohol abuse.

As the analysis of systemic data and the literature indicate, there are particular issues that impact on Indigenous families in Queensland, as elsewhere in Australia. Many of these interrelate with economic and location factors. For instance, 'Sorry Business' came up multiple times in schools with high Indigenous populations. For example, one principal in

Northern Queensland outlined some of the issues: 'So if it's very expensive for them, for example, to go to a funeral in the Torres Strait, they will get the money together to go there; but then they take a month to save up the money to actually return back to school'. In one rural school, the Principal noted that: 'One family is currently in [a town 600km away] and they have had Sorry Business since before the holidays, because they have now had three deaths in a row in the family'.

5.1.3 Personal circumstances

Whilst factors directly related to the students are referred to as 'personal circumstances', they are clearly affected by life circumstances. For example, when discussing anxiety as an issue that affects attendance, one person linked this to the home situation: 'Some of that separation anxiety is directly linked to domestic violence because the kid doesn't want to come to school because they are scared that mum is going to get beaten up while they are here; and they see themselves as protectors'. Anxiety, along with other issues of mental health, was seen as playing a big role in students' lives. In many schools this was seen as not just affecting one or two students. For example: 'I am probably working with about five or six in Year 12 at the moment who are sitting in those mental health issue areas. In and out of wards'. Whilst there was some evidence that very young students were facing difficult emotional issues, they did tend to be more prevalent in high schools, and in the older age group. For example, it was said in one location that: 'What we tend to find once the kids get older, particularly in grade 11 and 12 that one of the common reasons is depression and mental illness.'

Many of the principals also used the term 'apathy' to describe either the students' or parents' contribution to absenteeism. For example, one said in relation to which year levels were more likely to have the lowest attendance figures:

> Our grade of Preps are probably our lowest. And that has been because parents have not seen Prep as being an absolutely compulsory part of school life.

In relation to high schools, some of the apathy was seen as being community based, for example, it was said to be easy to find a job no matter if you attended school or not. Hence, comments included:

> So apathy based on the fact that it wasn't really important. We were in the middle of a mining boom, so there was zero unemployment. So it didn't really matter. You know, you had kids here a couple of years ago, in Grade 11; being offered apprenticeships with the big gas project … there was work for everybody in drilling. Well, that's all of a sudden dried up.

And:

> We have a certain amount of apathy but it is not apathy towards school; it is almost apathy towards society; in that certain kids don't see the point; don't believe that there's going to be a future.

Reasons given also related to students obtaining more independence. There were a number of comments which echoed the following in relation to which grades were most likely to have low attendance: 'and normally (Grade) 6, the upper school, where they are old enough to wag, or smart enough to know when mum and dad go to work'.

There were also several instances of severe illnesses which affected individual students. There were two instances, for example, of a 'little preppie' with cancer:

> We have got a number of students who have been treated for cancer or various sorts of cancer; we have a lung issue; and another child who is having surgery to have her ear reconstructed and stuff like that … Little preppie, for instance, at the moment, who really for the first six months of the year, only attended between sort of 9 and 10.30, because he was just too lethargic to get to here for the rest of the day; because of his treatments. … His attendance is like 38/40% but I'm never going to get him anymore than that at the moment. Maybe in two years' time, when he's kicked this cancer's butt.

5.2 Addressing conditions that prevent student attendance: Support structures and the removal of barriers

The monitoring of data was seen as essential by virtually all principals (a word search of the principal interviews for 'data' revealed the use of the term 558 times). Principals monitored the data daily; students were regularly informed of their own data usually on a weekly basis with attendance highlighted, often on assembly and in form classes at regular intervals (e.g.

every five weeks, at the end of term, the end of each semester and/or the end of year). Individual students were regularly identified early for intervention. For example:

> If we have had a kid away for a couple of days, we know who they are as an admin team because we see our 'absentee' list every day and our 'late' list; and we monitor that, so do my deputies. And if we see a kid who is on time, who has been late for a few times, we certainly go out of our way to acknowledge they are here on time and in class.

Messages about attendance were robustly and regularly conveyed to students. The importance of setting and communicating high expectations was commonly discussed in the interviews. These related to attendance, behaviour, and academic achievement. A principal in a small rural school said that the parents in the community also had high expectations of the school 'in terms of the education that their kids receive. So I think that helps to make things easier from the start.'

It was very apparent in these schools that everybody - teachers, students and parents - were aware of the importance of attendance. Some schools really drove home the message that achievement at school was dependent upon attending, for example, 'We directly target the fact 'if you are not in the classroom, you can't get an A'. The motto of 'every day counts' was used regularly and State Schools Updates (regular electronic newsletter to schools from the Department) and notifications around 'every day counts' were published on web pages and newsletters, and displayed on noticeboards around the schools. The attendance data of classes, year levels and the school were also regularly displayed. One principal gave an example:

> So we put up all the signs 'every day counts'; we put up the graphs with the teachers on attendance; and we found that the most important thing, most successful thing, is: when the teachers are seeing the progress being published on our school page, and we celebrate with the kids.

The cumulative effect of being 'five minutes late three out of five days or absent a day a week over the course of a year or over the course of six years' was regularly made to students. A number of schools had mantras, for example:

So I say to students 'learning counts', and they say 'every day'. And I say 'every day counts', and they say 'for learning'.

In other cases, students were constantly being urged to consider the importance of attendance. In one case:

We have a sign running all year about 'every day counts'; and we had a big push on that. So we talk about the 'every day counts' mantra; that is a big one for us. I smash it. Every week, you will talk about it. You have to let them know. You put it up on signs. You are in their faces about it. The T-shirts; got everything.

This 'in your face' style approach was evident in the much used 'data walls'. In some schools these data walls changed every day and were in every classroom. One principal gave an example of how they were used in his school:

So if I walk into the Year 1 classroom, I might see a thermometer. The thermometer might be a poster that is a metre high and it is red down the high; and it might be red from 0 to 85%; that colour is red. And then from 85% to 90%, that colour is orange or yellow/orange. And then from 90% to 100%, that colour is green. And then we have a postage stamp sized photograph of every child; and it is just simply moving the child's head onto the parts of the thermometer that indicates what their attendance is.

As one would expect from a set of schools where the data have demonstrated an impressive improvement, the principals were able to outline a wide range of strategies that they found effective beyond conveying messages about the importance of attending school and outlining the data. Many of these were at the whole school level. Most principals saw addressing bullying as being critical to ensuring a positive and inviting school climate. In one school they had worked hard on their mediation processes for bullying.

Most schools did intensive case management around individual students who were deemed to be chronic, or at risk of becoming, chronic absentees:

We case manage around the 11 and 12s … there has been a significant amount of resources put into that. That's like, kids at risk, regular meetings with them and working through reasons for absences, looking at reasons for assessments not being

handed in on time. So, it's really that tight case management that gives you the data that you need. It's time consuming, but there is value in it.

Case management often involved engagements with the families and other agencies. For instance, the participants explained that key to addressing attendance was liaising with families and helping them to access available support.

Another principal similarly described that when this occurred there was often a simple solution:

> We had one parent who was intellectually impaired, and his daughter was intellectually impaired … the youngest child was in Grade 2; he wasn't attending … When we rang him, he said, 'Oh, I don't send them when it's raining' … What it came back to was: his education wasn't good, but he valued education, he didn't want his books and stuff to get wet … So we got him an umbrella and spoke about which way they could go … and the attendance improved.

Whilst some schools thought that visiting homes was important, some principals mentioned that this was not always the wisest of moves due to safety concerns.

In many instances, there was a feeling in schools, as indicated in the introduction to this chapter, that they could not solve these issues alone. For example, one school was in the process of employing a social worker to coordinate case management of students with attendance issues.

Case management could lead to modified programs or timetables. This might entail a special classroom on site with 'a dedicated teacher, a dedicated flexible program, just for these students, in a flexi space'. Sometimes this involved transitioning back to the mainstream, but sometimes not. In one case the school developed a modified timetable for individual students to cater to the differing transport arrangements in their local community.

Sometimes case management could involve heavy individualised supports. Such supports often included mentors or dedicated teachers looking out for students' welfare. Comments included:

> If it has been a traumatic situation in the family due to domestic violence or whatever, then we will look at some of that flexible attendance. We will support them in the playground; we will support them differently in the classroom.

And:

> She's currently in Year 5. She's Indigenous. As a younger child, she was involved in quite a very traumatic event, which resulted in her mother passing away; and … she's now being cared for by grandparents and aunties, along with her sisters … her attendance was somewhere in the vicinity of 10 to 20%, for many years … She's now in Grade 5 and her attendance is 78% … one of the reasons is that she has learnt to ride a bike. We have a bike riding program here. She is not allowed to ride the bike if she doesn't attend. So that's one part of it. The other part of it is that she has a teacher that she seems to have really become attached to and there's some other support mechanisms that are in place.

A large number of schools, especially those in very high poverty areas sought to 'clear the path for learning' by providing food, transport and uniforms, amongst other material necessities. Breakfast clubs were popular, although there were disagreements about their effectiveness. In one school they had stopped the breakfast club. Instead they had developed a kitchen garden program where P-10 students grew their own fruit, vegetables and herbs, and had chickens:

> So if kids were hungry and coming to school with no food, it was, 'Okay, let's go over to the garden. Let's get some eggs. Let's go down to the kitchen and let's have a boiled egg and a piece of toast. This is how you make scrambled eggs. Let's make scrambled eggs and have a piece of toast.

Whilst schools did not have access to their own forms of transport to ensure students could attend, some principals tried to influence local bus companies:

> It wasn't their fault that they weren't getting to school because of financial reasons; mum not having fuel money … I would call the local bus company and explain the situation … we managed to get them bus passes so they could get to/from school and that improved their attendance.

87

A large number of schools had arrangements for the hire purchase of uniforms, or had collections of uniform donations that could be distributed to those in need. In one school they had special funds set aside: 'We have got a bit of money there to buy, if kids are struggling. We try to eliminate any of those blockers'. There were also arrangements for those students who found themselves independent:

> Independent students sometimes come through to us as early as Grade 10 … we have a very strong mentoring program for all of our independent students, to, again, track with them, be engaged in meetings with them.

One school was very proud of its support to keep young mothers attending school:

> We have got unfortunately a lot of girls that drop out because of pregnancy. So we have started an onsite school for them, that is separate; so it is a young mums' school. We have got a small crèche that we run for them.

Some schools, especially those with high Indigenous populations, made a significant effort to address issues in their various communities through the employment of local people and by working with local communities, and especially with Elders. One school had employed an Aboriginal liaison person to go on home visits with them: 'She will go with a teacher or an office person, or myself, and we find that much more open. They are more likely to engage with us and open the door'. In another case a group of local Aboriginal men who worked with the students:

> …and they have done good stuff. They are doing great stuff, working with us. They will actually work with our CEC (Community Education Counsellor) to go out into the community, throughout the day as well, to get kids to come back to school.

In one school that had a reported 15% Indigenous and 15% Pasifika population, they were trialling liaison officers for both groups.

In another highly urban multicultural school there had been a concerted effort to employ 'a number of culturally appropriate staff'. This has meant that: 'we have a Vietnamese person who can call Vietnamese parents; a worker who speaks Somali and Arabic; you know, Samoan, Tongan, etcetera. Some of them will do home visits for us as well; not necessarily all of them. It just depends what their role is at the school'.

However, not every school was of the view that there should be separate approach for Indigenous students, or any students from specific cultural groups. In one school in Central Queensland the Principal emphasised: 'The Indigenous students in our school, we have the same expectations. We have additional support people who can probably make a difference; making contact or the phone call with the parents; but, you know, it's really the same expectation that we have for all of our students'. Another principal strongly asserted that 'It's not about Indigeneity. It is about kids'. Another in a regional centre said: 'I would say here, no. We use the same sort of strategies for all of our kids, regardless whether they are Indigenous or not'.

In all instances principals indicated that they did not discriminate against new students who came with a history of chronic absenteeism. Comments like the following were not uncommon: 'we like to give the kids a fresh start and see how they go'. Most did not want to be judgemental about students or their families. However, they did make sure that they were over the data and understood why a student might have had the history they did. Most were also very clear about their expectations of attendance at the school. However, they indicated that this was the normal type of conversation that they would have with any new student.

5.3 Making school an attractive place to be

Whilst there were very obvious efforts to support young people coming to school who found it very difficult because of either their life or personal circumstances, what was common across all of the principal interviews was the desire on the part of school communities to make their schools a place that students would want to attend. This involved ensuring engaging curricula and pedagogies, creating a positive school environment, developing a system of rewards and celebrations, and extra-curricular programs.

5.3.1 Curriculum and pedagogy

While the importance of an engaging curriculum and pedagogy were prevalent themes within the principal interviews, these discussions were quite general (for example references to 'quality teaching and learning') and they rarely articulated what this might look like in the classroom. However, some principals were very explicit about the

importance of high quality pedagogies and curricula to attract students. One stated for example, 'For us, having an engaging curriculum is paramount … a very personalised curriculum for the needs of the students'. Another argued that 'I think that [curriculum] is a priority for us, for students coming but it is also working; wanting to be there and working to their best. So it is just not about absenteeism, I guess'. One argued very forcefully that:

> I think the pedagogy is really important. If what you are doing is not very exciting at school, the kids are not going to want to come. My theory around that is: teachers need to make their classroom activities so exciting, that the kids wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

5.3.2 Creating a positive school environment

Creating a positive environment was also often seen as key to attracting students. When asked why they had such high attendance at one school, the Principal indicated that:

> I would probably say it would have to be the environment and the feel of the school would be our number one. So kids are happy; they feel safe; you know, staff are friendly. It just has that type of environment and feeling.

Developing a positive environment was highly dependent upon enhancing the quality of relationships in the school. This meant rejecting deficit constructions of students, not making assumptions about students and their families, and staff really coming to know the students. Many comments were reflected in this Principal's statement: 'So it's around building all the relationships as well. And our staff here are particularly brilliant at that'. In one primary school, every teacher is expected to know five things about every student in their class and spend time with a least two students per day finding something new out about them. In another school, every staff member was expected to be a mentor to one of a group of identified students (approx. 60) who are seen as being at risk, the teachers are expected to: 'speak with that child and just touch base; find out about their weekend; and some of that is around attendance as well'. In some more remote schools, staff living in the community provided an opportunity to follow up on absentees: 'If they see kids out after school, they will talk to them about why they weren't at school. So it's sort of like everyone looks after everyone'.

5.3.3 Systems of rewards and celebrations and extra-curricular programs

The vast majority of schools had a reward system to drive attendance. Various schools had excursions to places like the movies or to Dreamworld. One school had a 'picnic excursion' for those students who had reached a 'target' attendance:

> Typical Red Riding Hood picnic basket; and they have tootled off and they will go across the local park this morning, after they have done their little trip; and have a cup of tea and some scones. The kids come back and they are just over the moon.

A system called Vivo Rewards was used in more than one school. This system uses a credit system whereby students who achieve (including attendance) are rewarded to the point where they can purchase materials from the 'Vivo store'. One Principal said of this system:

> The little token rewards from Vivo for the junior kids is an absolute winner... They love the little stickers they get. They log onto their account to see how many points they got; and go to their mate, 'How many have you got? I have got 35 today.' And they are just so into it.

Other schools have reward systems which include, and typify the diversity of them, having lunch with the Principal, VIP (Gold Class style) seats with popcorn on assembly, Principal's chair to use in classroom, USBs, rubbers and pencils, certificates, stamps in the diary, pizza parties, congratulation letters home to parents, and entry into an iPad draw.

However, there was also a strong sense amongst the principals that rewards should not be the main driver. As one said: 'You don't want kids to be dependent upon rewards; it's got to be intrinsic to make behavioural change'. Another said of their reward system: 'What I am doing is trying to change a culture; once it becomes a habit, then that will change as well'. There were also some dissenting voices about the use of rewards. One principal indicated of their approach which did not have:

> ...any initiative or rewards or anything like that. So ours has been more around educating parents, speaking to them about that; and daily follow-ups, absences. So if people are away, you know, we are picking the phone up every day to find out why. So not only has our data improved with attendance, but even the unexplained absences is what's also improved.

91

A similar point was made by another principal:

> I don't think it is sustainable always to have those extrinsic things. You have to be really careful as a school; if your children are going, 'Oh, well, there's no Jumping Castle this week or no....bus that took everyone to the movie, then they are going to go, 'I'm not coming to school now,' because it's superficial … You have to look at the culture around learning and ensuring kids are confident learners, so that they feel valued at school; and that will have that deep down 'this is why we need to be at school'.

Some schools have also introduced extra-curricular programs to attract students. These included a before-school robotics and physical activity programs.

5.4 Sanctions

Most schools had sanctions of some kind or other. However, a view summed up by one principal was shared by many others: 'certainly those punitive actions are the least effective, I believe'. However, many schools employed a detention system whereby students who had unexplained absences, turned up late to school or 'wagged' a lesson were expected to do an after-school or lunch time detention. Often these detention times were used to catch up on work that they had missed. In some cases, the systems around detention were very formalised. For example, one principal explained the situation at his school:

> I put in place a system where it's basically a 'strike one, strike two, strike three'. So first offence of truanting, I give students a clear warning. I also ring home and let the parent know and ask them if there's any consequences that they would like put in place. Probably 85% of parents agree that a detention should be given, even though it is a first offence. So they do a lunchtime detention of 20 minutes. Second time is automatically two lunchtime detentions; again, it is usually done over two consecutive days. Third time - now, I don't have too many of these - is with permission from the parents; they do a 3 p.m. after-school detention with me; usually Friday afternoons, when they are ready to go home and they really want to get out of school grounds. My statistics that I have been working with on those 3 p.m. detentions have - literally, I would be lucky to have one a fortnight now.

However, the dissenting voices on the use of detention included comments such as:

> I would really challenge those schools that are giving detention for absenteeism; because, like I said, there's reasons why the children will be away.

And:

> We don't do detentions for absenteeism, just because that's a bit of a 'big stick'. So 'why would you come to school, if you are going to get a detention, for being away?'

And:

> It's trying to get them to accept responsibility for their actions and trying to get them to have an individual, personal target and goal; rather than simply say, 'Well, you have wagged a lesson. I am going to give you detention.'

In many schools, especially in the senior years, the threat of cancellation of enrolment was seen as a necessary instrument. One principal indicated that:

> One thing that helped us all in terms of the senior school, the changes to cancellation. Prior to those changes, it was very, very hard to remove a senior student, no matter how old they were, who was refusing to attend/engage in work.

One principal told the researchers the possibility of enrolment cancellation was often seen as sufficient to 'jolt a child/family into action faster than you can imagine'. This view on cancellation was not universal. One principal stated: 'Rather than moving into the cancellation of enrolment process in senior, we prefer to set up an alternative transition, in terms of cutting them off completely'.

There was not a lot of support for legislative processes that punished parents for their children's non-attendance. For example, there was a strong view that fining parents did not work and that money and effort would be better spent on building community support and employing social workers to work with these families. However, it was not only in poor areas where legislation was seen as ineffective: 'I think, regardless of the socioeconomic situation of your school, a fine is not going to work'. There was also the sense that the legislation was rarely followed through on:

I think they are ineffectual to tell you the truth. I know there are a number of cases pending here and we are basically getting feedback that they are not going to go anyway. It's a toothless tiger at the moment until it gets some teeth, but we certainly won't be engaging with it. It's a last resort.

There was also a feeling that instigating legal processes destroyed relationships with the community, affecting trust and the ability to build partnerships.

Another principal also wanted their school to be a place students wanted to come to because they wanted to receive the best education possible and the best outcomes, not because they were scared of being fined. A principal with 25 years' experience who had never sent out a Form 4 (an official notice sent to parents under the *Education (General Provisions) Act* 2006 and as per processes outlined in the Department's *Managing Student Absences and Enforcing Enrolment and Attendance at State Schools* procedure) expressed concerns that parents with low levels of literacy would not be able to read or understand the form.

Whilst not technically a sanction, although some students and parents read it as such, the withholding of privileges was employed in many locations. This might relate to reaching a certain attendance target to attend the formal, graduation, school camps, sport and end of year celebrations. However, targets differed in different locations. For example, one school had a target of 85%, another's was 92% whilst another school's target was 95% for accessing privileges. In one school, this target varied according to the student:

> … we are always flexible around that because, you know, equity doesn't equal equality. So we may set a different attendance goal for a student, so that camp is their goal; we will set a different attendance you know, 'Over the next three weeks, I want you to come.' So it's about small goals.

In a number of high schools, the comment was made that withholding privileges was more effective with Year 12s, especially when it related to the formal, than any other year level. Hence, one principal noted that: 'So, in my school my best attending level is Grade 12 and that's not always the case, but that's because the Grade 12s absolutely know that their attendance is so strongly linked to their participation in formal, participation in graduation, participation in the fun things at the end of Grade 12 that they want to access'.

While there was not a lot of support for suspending students for frequent absences, a number of people did note that: 'We do suspend students for ongoing truancy'. However, the vast majority referred to the 'irony', 'senselessness' or 'craziness' of suspending for absence. One principal said: 'Why is it that I spend all this time trying to get a kid to school and then because they are not coming to school, I suspend them? Ah, that doesn't work'. Another was more forthright: 'That is just garbage; that is ridiculous'. In some cases though, a school suspension was used to enable students to catch up on work.

5.5 Conclusion

The interviews with the principals highlighted the enormous amount of work these schools were doing in order to improve attendance. They demonstrated commitment, initiative and creativity in relation to addressing those factors which inhibited attendance at school. In most cases they recognised that they would need to keep adapting current approaches and trialling new ones. They had implemented strategies that ranged from the severe (in students' eyes), such as non-attendance at the school formal for not meeting targets, to the good humoured, such as the 'gold class' seat on assembly. They took into account the life and personal circumstances of students. They put in place support structures, such as crèches, to ensure students could attend school and they sought to remove barriers, such as lack of transport options, which inhibited attendance. They also sought to make schools a place where students wanted to be. This involved paying attention to the climate and relationships within schools (student-student and teacher-student) and to issues of curriculum and pedagogy. In the vast majority of cases the principals saw sanctions as a last resort and were much more inclined towards rewards and celebrations. Taken together these interviews demonstrated a fully comprehensive approach to addressing student attendance at the sites in question.

A common feature across all of the schools was the way in which attendance was part of the common discourse within the school. Teachers, students, parents and community members were said to have all been aware of the schools' commitment to attendance targets. Many spoke about the importance of tackling the issue early from day one and with early intervention and adequate resourcing in the early years to nurture engagement from the earliest schooling experiences.

Another common feature of many of the schools was their close links to their local communities. Principals in these schools highlighted the positive impact of relationships in schools and within their communities, as well as developing links to outside agencies to support families who were struggling to get their children to school. There was also a sense that teachers needed greater education around issues that affected students, especially in relation to poverty and cultural awareness, and that could help them develop better relationships with students. There were some concerns expressed about the ways in which resources could be directed away from learning to enhance attendance for its own sake. Many of the principals stressed that attendance at school was not an end in itself; the attendance was about making every day count in relation to learning.

Chapter 6. Case studies

On completion of the 50 Principal interviews, researchers from the team analysed the transcripts looking for common themes, idiosyncratic approaches, and context specific strategies. Once a long list of schools had been drawn up, demographic data on the schools were examined in order to ensure that there was a spread of schools in relation to type (primary, high and P-12), Indigenous population and location (metropolitan, regional and remote). Consequently, the case study schools were situated in regions across Queensland; with ICSEA values ranging from approximately 800 to approximately 980 (See Figure 29).

Figure 29 Approximate ICSEA values of the case study schools
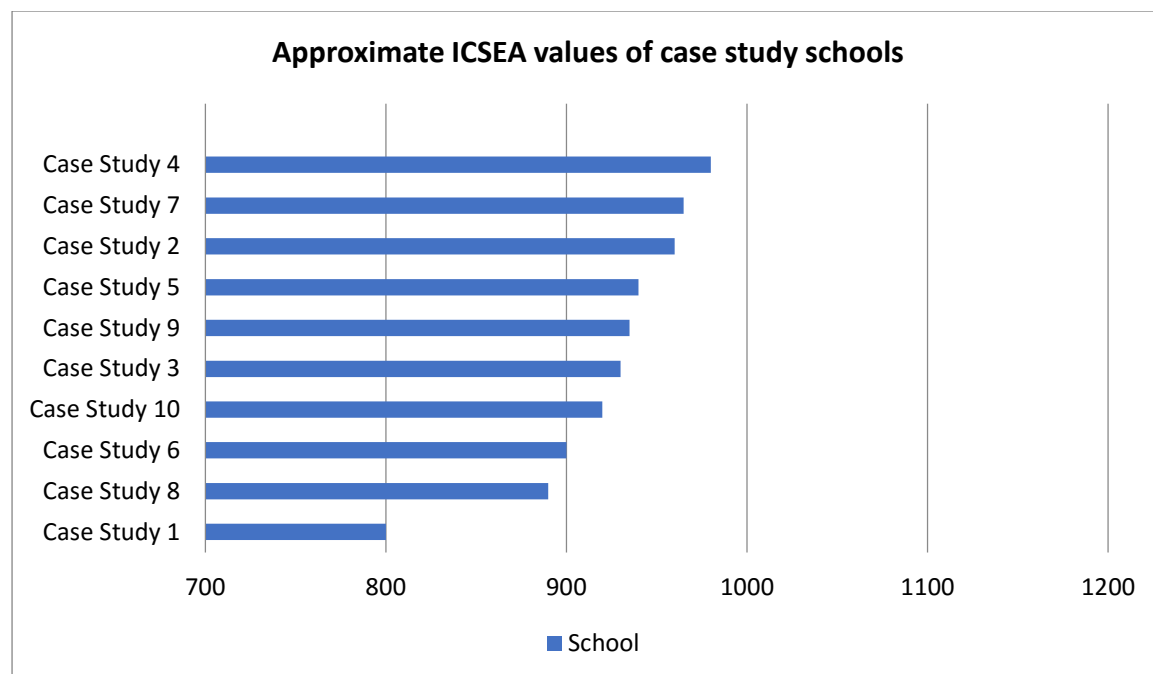
The case study schools do not present blueprints for the ways in which attendance strategies can be implemented in schools across Queensland. However, they do provide insights into the types of strategies that work for particular schools, their underpinning philosophies and the difficulties of implementation that sometimes accompany them. As such they do provide lessons for others. Taken together these case studies also foreground the significant work that is being undertaken in Queensland schools to maximise attendance.

6.1 Case study 1

Case Study 1 is a co-educational primary school located in Far North Queensland. The school has an enrolment of approximately 350 students; with over 60% of students identifying as Indigenous, and 50% having English as a second language. The school's ICSEA value, which is a little under 800, is the lowest among the case study schools and well below the national average of 1000. There were 90% of students situated in the bottom and bottom middle quartiles. In Term 3 of 2016, the attendance rate was 89%, with 55% of all students attending school 90% or more of the time.

6.1.1 Background/overall philosophy relating to absenteeism

The school's Principal recounted that 'I came here in 2014 and had a bit of a clean-up to do'. She explained that as part of this process, 'we looked at what it was that we want to be about. We want to be known as a school that has high expectations, high quality teaching and learning.'

The person responsible for monitoring and improving attendance has come to be known as the HEART of the school - Head of Enrolment, Attendance, Retention and Transition [into high school]. The Principal emphasised her belief that this position was less about administration and more about understanding the education process, and as such, had selected an experienced teacher for the role. 'She was a teacher for ten years before she was appointed into this position … so she has got that full understanding about all the stuff that impacts on educating a child … the well-being of the child … the support that she either offers from school or outside agencies that can wrap around a family' (Principal). While she noted that the HEART had predominant responsibility for attendance, 'it is not siloed … we all fully support and understand each other's work.' This was supported by the parents, one of whom stated: 'what the school is showing is: it's a responsibility on everyone.'

In attempting to drive up attendance rates, the Principal articulated that 'coming every day is actually … about having an opportunity to change the cycle, and we try to sell that in a manner that is not judgmental about where they are at'. This was supported by the Prep teacher who emphasised that, 'We build really good relationships. We have built that into our philosophy.'

The Principal also discussed the importance of research-based practice: 'We follow the Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan model, [Putting Faces on the Data (2012)] … [and] Ian McDonald's Systems Leadership model … we have got very clear systems/processes in place … we are embedding it. Our next step is to actually refine it.'

6.1.2 School definition of chronic absenteeism

The Principal defined chronic absenteeism as '… kids who are attending, definitely less than 85% … we have families where attendance can be as low as 50% … we have our tier 1 kids that are away occasionally and just need tracking … then we have got our tier 2 kids; the ones who are in the 86 to 89%. And then we have our tier 3 kids - 85% and under.' (Principal)

6.1.3 Barriers to attendance

The barriers faced by the school and its community were highlighted by various members of the school community and included:

- Cultural reasons
- High unemployment/Financial hardship
- Lack of public transport
- Transient families
- Physical and mental health
- Caring for younger siblings
- Young children who require attention
- Elderly carers who may not be as physically capable of walking children home
- Alcohol and/or substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Show week
- Low academic achievement
- Negative influence of older siblings
- Mondays and Fridays

6.1.4 Changes in data

While the Principal indicated that the school wouldn't reach the 90% attendance goal at the end of the year, she discussed the school's improvements in attendance data since the end

of 2013: 'Our attendance data was sitting on about 83%. We have closed the gap in attendance by almost 6% for our Indigenous kids; and overall, we have improved our attendance by 5.7%. And just last week, while [our HEART] wasn't happy with the fact that we had 84% attendance, in 2014 we had 77% in the same week. So the shifts are happening, but you can't take your finger off the pulse'.

6.1.5 Whole School approach: 'Data-driven'

The Year 1 teacher observed that 'we have been tracking [attendance] over four years; making it so visual; having all the data displays … it is not really in the back-drop; it is in the forefront'. This was supported by other teachers who reported that, 'we are very data-driven in this school' (Year 2 teacher) and the HEART who explained that, 'every five weeks we collate data … reading data and attendance data is included in that.' The parents reported that the school communicates these data with them through various means: 'it's always in the newsletter, every day on parade … posters … Facebook' (parents) (See Figure 30 and Figure 31).

Figure 30 Facebook post: May 2017 showing classes with 90% or above attendance

Term 2, Week 5 Attendance - Whole School Average 88%
Well done to all the classes who have attendance in the 90's! Fantastic effort from 4/5 A with 96% attendance and a special mention to 2 A and 3A, you guys rock! Icy poles for the classes with over 92% attendance.

Prep B	13	90
Year 1A	8	93
Year 2A	6	94
Year 3A	7.5	94
Year 4/5A	5.5	96
Year 5/6B	9.5	93
Year 5/6C	10.5	91

Figure 31 Excerpt from school newsletter November 2016 showing attendance data for all classes

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">Week 8, Term 4:   Whole school average 88.6%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Class</td><td>Days Away</td><td>Unexplained Absences</td><td>%</td></tr>
<tr><td>Prep A</td><td>5</td><td>3</td><td>95</td></tr>
<tr><td>Prep B</td><td>13</td><td>7</td><td>90</td></tr>
<tr><td>Prep/1</td><td>14.5</td><td>6</td><td>87</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 1A</td><td>8</td><td>4</td><td>92</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 1B</td><td>15</td><td>6</td><td>85</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 1/2A</td><td>11.5</td><td>7</td><td>90</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 2A</td><td>18</td><td>5</td><td>86</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 2/3A</td><td>22</td><td>6</td><td>82</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 3A</td><td>11</td><td>6</td><td>91</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 3/4A</td><td>13.5</td><td>8</td><td>90</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 3/4B</td><td>23.5</td><td>11</td><td>80</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 4/5A</td><td>11</td><td>5</td><td>91</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 5/6A</td><td>14</td><td>4</td><td>89</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 5/6B</td><td>10</td><td>9</td><td>92</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 5/6C</td><td>12</td><td>5</td><td>89</td></tr>
</table>

Prep A, wonderful job with 95%. Good work also to PB, 1A, 1/2A, 3A, 3/4A, 4/5A and 5/6C icy poles are coming your way. Let's have another fantastic attendance week this week, remember your individual attendance has to be 90% for weeks 5 to 9 to receive the sports pack.

The children are also kept apprised of their attendance rates: 'In our morning routines, we talk about attendance every day … Your data is - you have had two days off every week. So if you keep doing this, by the end of Year 12, you will be finishing in Year 8' (Year 5 and 6 teachers). To help the children understand their attendance, the teachers also described using visual data. For example, 'attendance chains' comprised of paper chains. The Year 1 teacher explained that 'every day that everybody's here or absences have been explained, then we can get another link on the attendance chain and they love seeing that chain grow'. However, the teachers made allowances for children who were frequently absent by giving them their own attendance chain, 'so that the rest of the class aren't let down. Also, so that child could reach their own goal' (Year 2 teacher).

Each class also has an attendance poster: 'Every week, the coloured stars that our class got … 'three blue stars for the first three weeks'; and we started to get into the 'orange'; and then 'green' we picked up a bit' (Year 1 teacher). The teachers also explained that they write the children's names on the graphs 'so they can see that they are causing the absence.' However, they were quick to emphasise that, 'It is not an unfriendly environment

… It is more so, 'let's see if we can walk together tomorrow,' or, 'I will be your friend at playtime' (Year 2 teacher).

Finally, following Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan's *Putting Faces on the Data*, every classroom has a 'data wall': 'Attendance is one of the issues that we look at … students … have a coloured card – 'blue for well above; green for above; yellow for at; then orange and red' (Year 2 teacher).

Some teachers also discussed incorporating attendance data into the mathematics curriculum: 'I have a morning PowerPoint and it's got the 'OneSchool snippet', and we go through how many hours of missed learning our class had for a week … percentage and graphing, counting in 5s' (Year 1B teacher).

6.1.6 Engaging with community

The Principal considered that establishing strong relationships with the school community was central not only for teachers, but to the role of the HEART: 'Anyone can advertise for 'Head of Student Services', but if they don't build those connections with the families … that is probably the key to the success … when I say 'the right person for the job', I sincerely mean 'the right person for the job' … she has that whole picture of who is connected to whom and how they are connected. And that is very powerful'.

She also noted the importance of building relationships with the local Indigenous community: 'When I came here in 2014, we hadn't had a NAIDOC day … it was all done by the community … The word went out on the street … we ran out of chairs in the hall … it didn't cost them a cent; it was acknowledging their culture … There was a lot of pride in the room'.

The school utilises several external agencies within the broader community such as The Smith Family, which provides 'Learning for Life' scholarships, and several charities donate food to the school for breakfasts and lunches. In addition, the school has developed links with James Cook University who are paying for 45 Year 6s to get on a bus and go to the university for the day to understand what university looks like.

The Principal also reported working with other schools when students have difficulties returning to the town: 'We tell them that that family is at our school. We say to the family,

'enrol at that school, until you get the money to come back to us. It is not that we don't want you; our door is open for you, the minute that you come back' (Principal).

The teachers, rather than the HEART, are expected to call the parents to follow up on absent students: 'Other schools I have been at, it's an office person's job … we track it and we write the notes to get them explained' (Year 5 and 6 teachers).

6.1.7 Rewards/ punishments

The school has a strong focus on rewards, which are shared with parents via Facebook. While all interviewees discussed a wide range of rewards for attendance, the most popular one, requiring 92% attendance over the five-week data collection period, is the 'slip and slide' (See Figure 32) or movie. The significance of these events was explained further by the Teacher Aide/ Community Liaison Officer in the context that many children are being raised by grandparents and may not have the opportunity to participate in the activities like these.

Figure 32 Facebook post March 2017

Today's Slip n Slide for the students who had good attendance at school from weeks 1-5 was a fabulous time had by all. It was a great way to cool off in the heat! They enjoyed a free yummy sausage sizzle with delicious orange juice. It was one of the best days ever! So much FUN!

Other rewards for attendance included sports packs, a Slushie, disco, sausage sizzles and a beach disco. The Principal additionally described the way the HEART going in the classroom to give balloons and dressing up in green (See Figure 33), with the green aligning with the coding of 'above average attendance'.

Figure 33 Facebook post March 2017

Celebrating a great term of learning and fantastic attendance, Prep 1/A were treated to a class party and 1 B were given some wonderful colourful balloons. Well done students!

The Year 3/4 teacher similarly rewarded her class when, after having 85% or less attendance for a period by making them green cupcake frogs (See Figure 34).

Figure 34 Facebook post October 2016

What have 3/4B been up to? It looks like the teacher has made them some yummy cupcakes to celebrate their attendance for week 2 of term 4 (last week). This was the first time that 3/4B have reached the GREEN for whole class attendance all year!! Well done 3/4B! Keep up your fantastic efforts. EVERY DAY COUNTS!

While punishments were directed at the parents rather than the students, there were consequences for children who arrive late: 'The kids know if they are two minutes late, they have to have a 'yellow' next to their name' (Year 2B teacher).

The Principal explained that before proceeding with potential prosecutions against parents of persistently absent students, 'we do a dummy letter … If we are not getting any bite we will go straight to Form 4 – we sent out five Form 4s last week, so we have upped the ante on that.'

6.1.8 Addressing conditions that prevent attendance

As described previously, transport is an issue for many families in the community. The HEART described the walking bus initiative: 'There's a big park in the centre of the community. At 8 o'clock she starts there; she blows the whistle; kids come running. As she's walking along the street, she blows the whistle and the kids come out and join the walk to school.'

The Smith Family representatives explained that some teachers also donate uniforms and shoes: '[They'll] raid Vinnie's once a term, or go to that $5 shelf … K Mart sells shoes for $4/$5 … there is a basket outside the office … students can just go and get a pair.' They also

described one class that got everybody to bring in shoes they had outgrown so the younger students could use them.

One of the Year 2 teachers explained that some children often come to school hungry: 'They will just go get a 'hungry lunch' because they are starving … they are not even picky, 'There is Vegemite or jam.' 'Don't care … I want food.' The Principal also explained that the teachers often buy extra food in their own grocery shopping to bring to school.

The interviewees discussed the 'shame factor' associated with having to ask for food; 'going past that idea that you are only coming because you can't give your kid food' (The Smith Family representative): 'Look, we understand at the end of the fortnight, money is a bit tight. We have a breakfast program. It's there every day. There's no shame' (Principal). Reflecting this, the Teacher Aide/ Community Liaison Officer who ran the 'walking bus' explained that children who come to the breakfast club read a book, as well as have something to eat.

6.1.9 Creating a positive school environment

The Teacher Aide/Community Liaison Officer described a distinct shift in the atmosphere of the school: 'nine years ago, most of the teachers were … old-school … now, there's more of a relationship between the teachers and the students'. This was supported by one of the parents who conveyed that, 'Mine like their teachers', and the teachers who described their 'open door' policy, so parents are always welcomed in to talk about any concerns'. One parent described the way 'You walk in the gate and everyone is smiling, saying, 'Good morning' … They take the time and say, 'You can stay if you want. You can spend time this afternoon'.

 In a school community facing multiple issues, the Principal also emphasised the need to help some children to 're-set': 'Tomorrow is a fresh day.'

6.1.10 Engaging curricula and pedagogies

The staff focused heavily on achieving academic success through explicit teaching and differentiation: 'Children from all levels will achieve success. So I think that does drive them to come to school' (Year 1 teacher).

The issue of student engagement was raised by one of the parents: 'You can have the students here but are they really engaging? That's the problem … You want them to want to learn.' The teachers also described several pedagogical approaches to make learning as fun as possible, including 'lots of singing and dancing and hands-on/manipulative sort of learning' (Prep teacher).

Several teachers also described ensuring students would not want to miss school: 'At the end of each day I say, 'This is what we are going to be celebrating tomorrow; this is what we are going to be learning about; and this is how we are going to be doing it. So don't miss it!' (Prep teacher). One of the Year 1 teachers similarly described how, 'I have a calendar in class and we track exciting things that are happening. It might be a ten-minute visit to the library but, 'You need to come tomorrow. You don't want to miss our library visit.''

When asked what made them want to come to school, the students discussed specific subjects in which 'you get to do fun things … it might be a day that you have PE … you can go on real technology, like computers … also science … in music, you can learn new songs … I like Maths, because it is awesome.'

6.1.11 Positive classroom environment

The teachers discussed various ways in which they could create a positive classroom environment. For example, the Year 5 and 6 teachers emphasised the importance of building relationships with the students, and one of the Prep teachers reported a 'high energy' feel in her classroom, while one of the Year 1 teachers described 'keeping it friendly and cheerful, with colourful things in the room'. She also noted the importance of creating a safe space for learning, 'where they feel they can come and talk to me … if they are a bit late and things like that, I'm not going to stand there and yell at them'. The Prep teacher reported celebrating attendance: 'we celebrate attendance every day … get excited about who is at school … we talk about if somebody is away and how much we miss them.'

6.1.12 How effective are these strategies?

While the school's strategies had clearly brought about improved attendance, issues relating to (1) the intense focus on rewards; and (2) the daily inundation of data and messages about attendance were raised.

6.1.13 Student views

While rewards were frequently discussed by the children, a few added that by coming to school 'You learn better' and 'you can get really, really smart.' The students also discussed the effects of poor attendance in terms of missing out on rewards as well as learning: 'They won't learn anything … Attendance might go to red … Each day that we miss out on school, we have so much learning missed out … they don't know what to do, … so the teacher will have to explain it to them … you might miss out on attendance reward.'

6.1.14 Teacher views

'I think everything that is done here is so good … the five-weekly rewards that they get. I think it's all done very well. [The office staff] who call home as well, support you with that … So honestly, I think it is really good' (Year 1 teacher).

The teachers also discussed difficulties relating to the school's approach to absenteeism. The first was the financial burden of the rewards program funded through the class budget or by teachers. The second related to potentially overwhelming children with constant messages about attendance and their attendance data.

6.1.15 Parent and community views

The teachers' concerns about overwhelming children with information about attendance was reflected in the responses of the parents and community representatives: 'They have to watch the [Jonathan Thurston] video every morning … sometimes I don't want to watch it – the children don't want to either … It's a lot of pushing … in the newsletter, every day on parade … the teacher says things … my little one says, 'I have to go to school. I have to go to school. I have to go to school.' … They should be talking more to the parents; and less to the kids.'

Several parents questioned the 92% attendance requirement to participate in the slip and slide/ sausage sizzle as their child had been absent for legitimate reasons rather than having an unexplained absence. The Principal indicated to parents that: 'It is not that your child has an explained absence; it is just that there is no excuse … we can't sit there and track 385 kids and decide that this one is allowed … and this one is not allowed'.

One parent conveyed discontent that, 'My son has never made one of those reward days … He's only just missed … through being sick … he's not wagging … I'm not just keeping him at

home … I had doctor's certificates and rang up … he gets really sad; he doesn't get to go on slip and slide and barbecue just because he was sick two and half days.'

The Principal also described the negative responses of other parents: 'a few parents ring up quite upset that their child wasn't invited … 'it's not my child's fault' … we were bullying her child about attendance … I said, 'your child is not being punished … just not being rewarded' … we were actually threatened, 'Well, I am going to go to the Department … put in a formal complaint'.

Another parent expressed concerns about 'the way parents are spoken to about it, sometimes … they kind of sit there with this authority of, 'You need to do this, this and this and if you don't do this, I am going to ring this/that person.''

However, parents who had been through very difficult experiences explained that with support from the staff, they've turned things around, are now more organised and get doctor's certificates for any absences.

6.1.16 Summary

Staff at this school placed data and communication of data at the forefront of its suite of strategies to improve attendance. While most schools have an 'Attendance Officer' or similar, in this school such a position is considered less about administrative responsibilities and more about understanding the teaching and learning process, and the barriers students may face in their learning. This was achieved by appointing an experienced teacher, rather than an administrative assistant, to the role. The school addressed the barriers faced by many students in low SES communities in ways which minimise the 'shame factor'. For example, students facing difficulties with transport can easily join the 'walking bus', which also became a social part of each school day. The breakfast club includes time for reading in order to 'go past the idea that you can't give your kid food', and lunches, shoes and uniforms are easily accessible to the students.   This school's improvement in attendance data was also due to the strong relationships the school has established and maintained with the local community. This includes the Indigenous community and other schools attended by Indigenous students in particular when they are unable to return from Sorry Business, due to their inability to afford transport. The Principal emphasised that

corresponding improvements in attendance had developed over the course of several years, with no quick or simple solution.

6.1.17 What have we learnt from this school?

This school's appointment of an experienced teacher to the role of Attendance Officer, (known in this case as the HEART), highlighted the importance of a deep understanding the teaching and learning process, as well as the barriers students may face, in schools' efforts to improve attendance. The school also focused on building relationships, which included minimising the 'shame factor' by providing students and their families with easy access to the things they needed (e.g. shoes, lunches) and establishing the 'walking bus', which provided a free and safe way for the children to get to school. Foregrounding and sharing attendance data was also central to fostering awareness of the importance of student attendance, as was the notion of teamwork, with staff working together to achieve improvements, rather than a 'siloed' approach which leaves the responsibility for attendance with a single Attendance Officer.

6.2   Case Study 2

Case Study 2 is a co-educational primary school, located in North West Queensland. The school has an enrolment of approximately 450 students; with approximately 20% of students identifying as Indigenous, and 9% having English as a second language. The school's ICSEA value, which is approximately 950, is below the national average of 1000; with close to 70% of students situated in the bottom and bottom middle quartiles. In Term 3 of 2016, the attendance rate was 94%, with 78% of all students attending school 90% or more of the time.

6.2.1 Reasons for absenteeism

During the course of interviews, multiple reasons were given by interviewees as to why students might not have high attendance rates. These included:

- Cultural reasons

- Students' residential arrangements

- Distance

- Lack of public transport

- FIFO/shift working parents

- Holidays in school time

6.2.2 Whole School approaches

The Principal conveyed the importance of staff ownership of the cultural shift needed to improve attendance: 'So not just the one person who ends up picking up the portfolio of attendance - really having and believing in the culture shift of attendance, wanting to improve … 'we believe in this; we are wanting to see a change,' … And it becomes a signature practice.

6.2.3 Monitoring data

The Attendance Team (A Team) comprised of the Principal and several staff who had volunteered to assist with improving attendance in the school. In order to achieve high standards, the Principal indicated that the school's attendance target was above that of the

region: 'It is 93%, but the school set it at 95. I'm happy to go with that because we are pitching for the A.'

Attendance data was shared with the children through the use of attendance trackers in each classroom, which showed children's attendance at 100%, 95-99, 94-91, and below 90. The parents advised researchers that this information, as well as messages about the importance of coming to school, were conveyed in a positive way. One stated that: 'I sit on assembly and hear the Vice Principal and Principal just reiterating to the kids 'every day counts.' I have seen it as a really positive message; that they are telling the children how important coming to school is.'

6.2.4 Punishments/rewards

In discussing rewards, the Principal emphasised that awareness should take precedence over rewards.

One of the teachers in the A Team discussed the limited success of class-based rewards systems: 'In our first year, I remember giving a pizza party for attendance and that didn't last very long because it was class-based … a whole group of students who were trying really hard to improve their attendance weren't receiving anything for it; and the kids weren't happy about it; the parents and teachers weren't happy about it.'

There were various other reward systems in place. The most popular reward was the jumping castle, which was described by the children, who explained that this major reward was changed every year. This was also taken up by the teachers, who noted that, 'This year, we are talking about doing different rewards, just to keep it exciting.' Future plans for rewards included an 'Attendance Cup'; to be awarded to the class with the best weekly attendance, with ice blocks given as prizes. While the limited success of class-based rewards had been noted previously by the A-Team, the Principal described the potential success of such a reward for a small school situated in a very hot climate.

The children discussed the different levels of bronze, silver and gold, which related in part to attendance, and in part to behaviour. One stated: 'You get prizes for being on different levels … you need an application to move up … If you read the questions and you think you have done most of them, you tick the box. But you also have to write a student statement to say why you want to move up … and why you think you should. You need to get your

teachers to sign it; and you have to sign it as well; and the behaviour committee has to approve it … It is every five weeks we get an application form.'

The children were involved in selecting the events which were conducted as prizes for attaining the different levels: 'We have about 20 students - because we have about 20 classrooms - and in each classroom, we have a student council, a boy and girl for each classroom. What they do, they organise the events that we get awarded with' (Students).

The staff did not agree with the notion of giving detentions for absenteeism; with the Chaplain in particular describing such an approach as 'odd'.

The Indigenous Community Representative also thought that fining parents of persistently absent children was ineffectual: 'Murri people are not going to worry about that. Taking the money off them, they are not going to worry about.'

6.2.5 Addressing conditions that prevent attendance

The A Team explained that there was no formal policy to address the conditions that prevented some children's attendance. However, they emphasised that 'although we don't have something written down on paper that is the policy of the school; we help every child, regardless of who they are, whether they tell us they have had no breakfast, no sleep. Well, we have had children sleep in the sickroom.' The community representative and parents explained that the school helps families with breakfast club and lunches in ways that remove the 'shame factor' often experienced by families in low SES communities: 'They have a breakfast club once a week, once or twice a week; where you can go down and get toast/cereal … And it's done tastefully. Like, it is not right in your face, 'Here you go. You have got no food today. You can go down there.' … so it is not a big thing. And they come back with their sandwich with everyone else.'

The community representative similarly discussed the way the school assisted parents with providing uniforms, 'I know the uniform shop does have cheap uniforms; some second-hand uniforms, some are giveaway. So if the parents want it, they can do it.' However, the A Team emphasised that while 'we have the expectation that you come to school in your uniform and that you wear it with pride … our message is, 'Just come to school' … if you don't have shoes, that's fine; we can help you with that. Or you wear whatever you need to

wear and that's fine. Like, who cares what you look like; just come to school and we can help you.'

6.2.6 Creating a positive school environment

One of the parents enthusiastically described the Principal's approach: 'I have never heard anyone praise the school like this Principal. You know, 'We go to the best school in town. Remember that our school is the best school,' and just re-enforcing that positive.' Other parents described the 'positive feel' of the school more generally: 'I think you walk into this school and it's got a nice environment; a nice aura within the school, where kids are happy, parents are smiling, teachers are communicating with you,' and 'I always felt going to classrooms and helping if I have got time, to do reading books or help recite words, parents are very welcomed. You get that feeling.' This school feeling was accentuated by the positioning of 'Buddy Benches' around the school, which were used by the children as a signal to others that they needed someone to play with. Photos of the 'Buddy Benches' were shared with the parents through Facebook (See Figure 35).

Figure 35 Facebook post 3 February 2017

Thank you, Rotary!
The buddy benches are here. The colours chosen look great.

The A Team also explained that the students were not penalised if they came late rather, they are welcomed into the school when they arrive. The Principal described one strategy he had developed with a particular student who tended to arrive late:

> He didn't like arriving late, so he didn't come. So we found a strategy; whenever he comes, he comes and sees me and I will take him up to class. He hasn't arrived late

because he's been with me. There won't be that, 'Why are you late?' It is just, 'Come on in. Quick. Grab a seat. Let's get going.'

The children described several reasons why their school was the best school in town. In addition to the rewards, they explained that 'every week we have a 'hot tip'. And this week is 'being kind to others … You have to be friends with others. So if you see somebody out in the playground who is not - doesn't have anyone to play with, you say, 'Do you want to join in our game?''

The children's focus discussion group, which was comprised of the Student Council, also conveyed their appreciation of having a voice in the school. I like [our school] because you can make a difference … Like, if you want to change something that's going on around the school … [the Principal], because he said he's always available, if someone wants to talk to him … With 'you can make a change', Years 2 and up, you can apply to be on the Student Council; and that's when you look at things, like 'put a new playground, so people can enjoy school more, and make all these changes.'

Children who were not on the Council were also able to contribute: 'at your break, you can write your idea on a piece of paper. And in the office, there's a 'suggestion box', so you put them in there … if they can't change it, they can't change it … I am pretty sure with the Student Council meetings, they take the box with them; and look at all the ideas and see what they can do to encourage that idea and see if it's good/bad.'

Favourite places around the school were also discussed by the children. While one child explained that his favourite club was 'a club that is starting up at school. It is about robotics and coding and lots of technical stuff … it's at lunchtime, first break,' all of the children were enthusiastic in describing the school's 'Yarning Circle': 'it's like a circle area that goes up and then has a small roof; and then all these trees are now growing in a big circle. And that's where we can go off, if we want to relax and stuff.' The Yarning Circle was also discussed with parents via Facebook.

6.2.7 A 'Face and Place' for Indigenous children

The Indigenous Community Representative also emphasised the importance of having a school-based Indigenous staff member, such as a teacher, CEC or teacher aide who is familiar with the community and can be the go-between person if something goes wrong.

114

She furthered this theme: 'If we could get more people, Murri people in schools, that would save a lot of our kids,' and stressed that, 'A lot of Murri kids, if they have got an Aboriginal face there, they feel comfortable … We have got to have a place in the school somewhere, where we feel safe … we won't get that education if you don't have someone there to understand us.' In explaining the importance of having support for Indigenous children from their community, she drew from her own experience: 'I have had the support of teachers when all my kids went to school. The teachers supported my children and supported me. With that support, my kids all went through Grade 12.'

The crucial importance that she saw in building strong relationships with Indigenous communities was clearly evident:

> Us Murris, we operate in a very different way to you guys, you know. Once you say something the wrong way, you have lost us; or a teacher would lose us. They won't have them. The respect is not there anymore. Then it would go from mum, to dad, to brother, to uncle and aunty; then everybody's poisoned. Where if you have got someone there and they know how to treat them and talk to them, you will have the kids all the time.

6.2.8 Addressing the needs of specific groups

The Principal indicated that the school '[doesn't] really target Indigenous/non-Indigenous. It is just any kid we are having trouble getting into school. So that we have got the support there with the breakfast club, with the lunchtime/lunches space that they can hang out and go and drop in and talk to people; so guidance officer, Chappy (Chaplain), things like that'.

6.2.9 Engaging curricula and pedagogies

The Principal discussed the link between attendance and engagement: 'when we look at attendance, it is about the work in the school; is around making sure our kids are engaged, focussed and supported at school.' He went on to explain the importance of quality teaching and learning and the support/scaffolding, to help students with their work.

6.2.10 Positive classroom environment

The parents and community representatives discussed the positive attitude of the teachers 'and how they come through' for the children, emphasising that 'there is no bad teacher here.' The children indicated the significance of having fun in the classroom whilst at the

same time stressing the importance of being challenged academically: 'I would like a teacher that would be strong on us, like, telling us what we are doing wrong, so we can improve; but somebody who has also got - like, does fun stuff every now and then, instead of just being strict on your work and getting everything done … in my class, if everyone's good, we get to play games; and they are always fun.'

Another child explained that she liked school 'when there's a good teacher looking after me; because it makes it easy for me to learn; don't get stressed out.'

6.2.11 Individual approaches

One of the children claimed that their school 'is the best school because if you don't know something, you don't have to worry about people teasing you because you don't know it; because the teacher will give you one-on-one and help you learn that.' This was also reflected in the A Team's explanation of using an individual curriculum plan for some students, including a particular Year 6 student who suffered from anxiety.

One of the teachers on the A Team discussed the school's focus on continuity in the role of teacher aides: 'We have specific teacher aides for students with disabilities and general teacher aides. The general teacher aides, we have tried to give the lower school an hour a day, at the same time … so there is just that routine … it is always the same teacher aide, which helps with those kids who might be anxious or whatever; that they build that relationship.'

6.2.12 Student views

While the children were enthusiastic in their discussion of rewards, they were aware of the importance of attending school for academic reasons. One stated: 'Because if you are missing lots of school days, you will miss out on something important and you won't be able to learn … Our motto is, [about every student learning] and we can't really learn if we are not at school.'

6.2.13 Teacher views

The Principal discussed the improvements in learning outcomes that had come from the improvements in attendance:

> We just had a conversation at our staff meeting around writing samples and that conversation is starting to come up now, which wouldn't have been in the past, is

'look at this child who is now attending, look at the difference in their results.' … So we are actually starting to see that correlation, that link.

The teachers also noted that the parents of children with improved attendance were taking ownership of their children's school attendance. One teacher noted that: 'Even children that we used to pick up in the car, they are actually turning up all the time now; because the ownership - the parents could see the difference it made. And now they are taking their ownership of getting them here.'

The teachers expressed some concern about sick children who were refusing to stay home: 'I have had parents bring their kids in, like, in school uniform and deliver them to me, saying, 'They are so sick but it was not worth the fight. They are here now. Can you ring me and I will come and get them?' … I think we end up sending a lot of kids home sick during the day because they are actually coming to school when otherwise they would be staying at home.'

6.2.14 Parent and community views

The parents conveyed that they were happy with the school's overall feel and approach to teaching and learning. For example, one parent recounted her child's experience of changing schools:

> My son started Prep at [another school]. Up till the last week of term 4 he cried, every day begging me not to leave him there; and it was horrible … [The teacher] defined him as "a naughty kid" … He had to go and see the principal every day and get a book signed off … So I moved him here; and … [his new teacher] is like, "I have never got a problem with him" … I think a culmination of good teachers and … a nice environment; a nice aura within the school, where kids are happy, parents are smiling, teachers are communicating with you. He loves coming to school, absolutely loves it.
> And he's not a naughty kid at all.

A few parents discussed the focus on attendance: 'The only thing I will say, with the pushing a lot of the attendance on parade and things like that, especially when my daughter was a bit younger, she didn't understand it as much … if she was sick, genuinely vomiting or whatnot at home, she's, 'No, no, no, I have to go to school. Otherwise I will miss out on rewards,' and things like that.'

As was the case in several schools, there was also some critique of the fairness of the rewards system, particularly the jumping castle, which only applied to children whose attendance was 95% or above: 'But then you have the kids that are legitimately sick that are missing out on this; they are getting punished for being sick … those who are genuinely sick and just truants - there is no divide between them. It is just 'if you are not here, you are not here; the reason doesn't matter.'

6.2.15 Summary

The Principal at this school emphasised that awareness about attendance, and its importance for academic success, must take precedence over rewards. This was highlighted in his assertion that class-based rewards in particular had achieved only limited success in improving attendance. The staff also did not support punitive measures, which were considered unproductive, with punishing parents through fines similarly described as an ineffectual deterrent for Indigenous families. This school also helped to provide breakfasts, lunches, uniforms and shoes in ways which minimised the 'shame factor' for families experiencing financial hardship. Students were not penalised for coming late. Rather, they were simply welcomed into the classroom, and this positive school environment was enhanced through the inclusion of student voice, clubs, 'buddy benches' and the inclusive use of spaces such as the Yarning Circle.

6.2.16 What have we learnt from this school?

The overriding messages from this primary school were the importance of prioritising awareness about the importance of attendance rather than focusing on rewards, and the importance of minimising the 'shame factor' for families who need additional assistance. While in some schools, students were penalised for coming late, potentially discouraging them from attending school at all, students in this school were simply welcomed into the classroom when they arrived.

6.3 Case Study 3

Case Study 3 is a country town school, located 80 kilometres from metropolitan CBD. The ICSEA data for the school indicated that 47% of students were in the bottom quarter of Community Social-Educational Advantage. Of total enrolments, 17% identified as Indigenous in the 2016 MySchool data. In Term 3 of 2016, student attendance for all students was 92%, with 76% of students attending 90% or more of the time.

6.3.1 Background/overall philosophy relating to absenteeism

In 2015, a new Principal commenced at the school. Previously, according to some staff, rolls were not regularly recorded, with months of no attendance records. The current Principal introduced a thorough attendance recording procedure, requiring whole-of-staff commitment. The measurement system they now use is *ID Attend*, which is linked to SMS messaging to parents' mobile numbers to alert them if a student is not at school and the school has not been notified. Daily recording and follow-up has, according to the Principal, reduced significantly the number of unexplained absences and increased the percentage of children attending 95-100% (School Annual Report 2015). As the Deputy Principal indicated, 'we have had a huge push around our attendance; not just the data but the shift in attitude around it, the perception of why it's important; and that's been a two-year journey, basically, to work on that.' When asked about this 'shift in attitude', she explained,

> So it's raising awareness with the staff. Then it's been raising awareness with the children; and then through the newsletter, we also raised awareness with parents. We have also had a push on our whole school assembly; we have also been rewarding attendance*.* So it's gone from just being *waffly talk* to actually *tangible rewards* through our point system, which the children then translate into currency, to spend online.

Three groups were noted in the interviews with school staff and parents as having attendance issues.

1. The Principal specifically noted that Prep attendance is lower than other grades, as Prep had been recognised as not compulsory.

2. The school has a high percentage of high needs children (as there was a Special Education Unit on site that was integrated two years ago when new Principal commenced), with significant medical conditions that impact on attendance due to not feeling well enough to attend school, along with attending medical and allied health appointments.

3. The Guidance Officer (who is the key person working with the hard to reach children) noted that 'Anxiety is a major factor; and not just from the child, but, also, sometimes the parents have some anxieties about their children attending'.

6.3.2 Strategies

Overall, the Principal referred to relationships and pedagogies as key to supporting student attendance. In this regard the Deputy Principal indicated there was a 'team approach': 'I think it's that united front from the whole staff…. it's a real 'teamness' about it.'

A strong school community spirit was communicated across the interviews. A community member captured such in his description of the school as a 'People focused school'. Teaching staff, parents and community members collaborated together to support children's participation at school. As the early intervention teacher noted, 'Well, it's all about relationships and having people at your school that know the community and that community trust/respect as well; one they feel comfortable with, that they can approach and not feel judged.'

And the Guidance Officer explained 'there's that community feel, that 'we are all in it together and we all should be here' - yeah, so I think that's something that the school does well'.

6.3.3 Whole School approaches

The Chaplain ran a daily Breakfast Club with volunteer assistance from local churches, Aboriginal organisation, and community members. She also had sandwiches ready in a fridge to give out when needed. Staff all contributed to making take home dinners that were stored in the freezer for families in need.

School attendance was recorded by each class teacher at the beginning and end of the day through *ID Attend*. The collated weekly data were sent to teachers on the

Sunday and then class collated data were shared at assembly on the Monday, with prizes awarded for the highest attending class. Individual students who had had 100% attendance went into a draw for the Principal's chair for a day. One student said, 'We get a pizza party and we sometimes get a cake, if we get a month or something, if our whole entire class comes; and we get the Principal's chair' (see Figure 36).

Figure 36 Principal's chair

For individual rewards, the school subscribes to an online platform called *VivoClass*. The program is advertised as a 'skills and character building platform'. The school utilises the program to reward school attendance, and students accumulate one Vivo point for each day of school attendance, and further points for following school rules. The school has customised an online catalogue that students can then choose to spend their accumulated points on. The purchased items are sent to the school to dispatch to the students.

The teachers who were interviewed expressed a commitment to doing whatever they could to meet the needs of the children through engaging and exciting learning programs, working through a team approach with a learning enhancement teacher for each year level, reading coach and master teacher. One teacher explained, 'As teachers, we have to look at the curriculum and know how our students learn. So we have to make sure all their learning needs are met, so they

do engage and (ask) is that the issue why some students might not want to be at school?' She further noted, 'Because you need the children to come to school, feeling they can accomplish something in their day. If your curriculum and your planning for them isn't on track, you are letting them down; you are not setting them up to succeed.'

Whole school events like 'Ride to School' (on bicycles) sparked a lot of student interest, as there is minimal public transport in the area, so children are dependent on adult caregivers to be driven to school. Cycling with others was said to have provided children with safety and independence. Interviewed students were highly positive about the Ride to School program and felt it should happen every week on a Wednesday, to encourage more interest in coming to school.

The school has a close working relationship with a local Aboriginal owned company that provides family, housing, community and youth services to Aboriginal people in the area. The Deputy Principal stated:

> We have got [the company] ... that works really closely with the school, with the Indigenous kids here. They chase families up for us, with the conversation - not the big stick, but a conversation around, 'What's going on? What's happening in the family? What do you need help with? Little Jimmy is not here,' whatever. So we work in partnership with them, too.

Youth workers from this organisation worked with Aboriginal students through a weekly leadership and cultural mentoring program for Years 4, 5 and 6 students, a homework club and holiday programs. And there were whole-of-school plans to work with the local Aboriginal museum on a regular fortnightly basis to embed traditional language in the school curriculum, that had been driven by teachers, according to one, asking Aboriginal teaching staff: 'How can we start to learn about that [traditional languages] to engage these [Aboriginal] kids more?'

6.3.4 Classroom approaches

Since the integration of the Special Education Unit into the school, a full-time learning enhancement teacher has been appointed to work with students with disabilities and students who receive grades below a C for each year level. A parent noted when the move

to integration was announced, the Principal explained to parents that 'every teacher who works with your child will be given a portfolio of your child, to understand what he or she needs. The door is always going to be open.' Class teachers and the early intervention teacher spoke of continual collaboration to meet student needs to support attendance and participation.

Year 1 teachers talked about communicating with parents, as young children are dependent on parents getting them to school, about the importance of school attendance and explaining the structure of the day to familiarise both child and parent to alleviate anxieties. One stated:

> I have got a parent at the moment, that I am about to send a visual timetable of our day; so she's aware of what's happening each day, the child is aware of it each day. It lessens that anxiety about what's happening the next day. We are trialling that with one of my students, at the moment.

A Year 6 teacher explained that it was more effective to convince the students of the importance of attending school, so they then will tell their parents that they want to go to school. And with students who were struggling with attendance due to major family issues, he indicated that he took time to 'check in with them at the end of the day, 'How is today? What didn't you like today?', or, 'How did you go in the playground, who did you play with?', and having those conversations with them; so they know that I am on their side; like, I do care about it and, 'Am I going to see you tomorrow?' Rapport with each student was seen as being key to improving attendance.

Parents interviewed, spoke of how wonderful the teachers were and that their children wanted to come to school because they liked their teachers.

6.3.5 Individual approaches

Teachers made personal contact with families when a student had not attended school, with no explanation. As the Deputy Principal noted, 'So now it's conversations; we are ringing parents. The teachers are taking the lead first with the conversations…' One student indicated that: 'A lot of teachers help out kids

who don't attend. If they miss up to a certain amount of days/weeks, the teacher will phone up to find out what's happening. '

A Case Management Committee comprising of the Head of Special Education Services, Behaviour teacher, Deputy Principals, Chaplain, Guidance officer and Early Intervention Teacher met every Thursday morning to discuss actions for individual case students. Collectively members on the Committee pieced together the information they had to then propose actions to support the student's attendance and participation at school. Strategies utilised included: phone calls and meetings with families, locating barriers, and customised approaches to counter the barriers. School staff worked with families to support children's attendance and participation. As one parent with two high needs children noted: 'Parents feel supported by the school'.

Punishments were not mentioned by any interviewee.

6.3.6 Summary

The whole of team approach that sought to support students and families seemed to work as it was consistently conveyed through references to community spirit and cohesion as a place of trust.

From a student perspective, the strongest lure for coming to school was to be with friends, along with physical activities such as cycling, yoga, cross country, football, boxing, tennis and gardening. The teachers meanwhile believed that positive relationships with children and their parents were essential for consistent school attendance. The parents similarly reported feeling supported by the school, which was evident in their comments that the Principal and teachers actively listened to their concerns. The importance of relationships was also reflected in the presence of members of the local Aboriginal community organisation, with the weekly yarning with children and parents building trust and assurance in school attendance.

6.3.7 What have we learnt from this school?

The key messages gained from this school were the importance of a shift in attitude around attendance, and the value of a whole-of-community approach that communicates to children and families 'we are here for you – we want to support you and work with you'.

6.4 Case Study 4

Case Study 4 is a co-educational secondary school catering for Years 7-12; located in the northern suburbs of Brisbane. The school had an enrolment of less than 800 students, with approximately 5% of students identifying as Indigenous, and almost 10% had English as a second language. Its ICSEA value was less than 1000; with over 60% of students situated in the bottom and bottom middle quartiles. In Term 3 of 2016, the attendance rate was 89%, with 65% of all students attending school 90% or more of the time.

6.4.1 Background/overall philosophy relating to attendance

The school's philosophy was reflected in the following statements:

'Attendance is almost the outcome of everything else we are doing' (Deputy Principal).

'…sometimes people focus so much on attendance, they forget that it's got to go *beyond attendance*; just having kids turning up in body to school – we have got to get them engaged while they are there' (Deputy Principal).

For the school, attendance was therefore more broadly conceptualised as a process rather than as an outcome in and of itself. This process involved a critical social awareness, which was evident in the view of one of the Year Coordinators: 'Are they [the students] okay?' is the first question. 'Let's worry about the academic performance later.' It is 'are the kids okay?' Because we are in a community that isn't okay; you know, there are so many things out there'. The Principal provided an overview of the school approach to attendance:

> Without sort of throwing out all of our curriculum … we focussed a lot on
> 'when we come to school every day, what does that look like?' For
> attendance, it meant that you come to school every day. 'When you come
> to school every day, you come ready for learning … if there's barriers to
> learning, what does that look like here?' So, 'How did we as a school,
> teachers support Johnny or Lizzy, or whoever else, that struggled to get to
> class?' So, 'At the classroom door, what did that look like … and how do we
> support that?'

The Student Support Team, which was comprised of the School-based Police Officer, the Guidance Officer and the Student Support Officer, emphasised that 'it's that strength-based approach, where it is student/client focussed, support. So everything about those new pedagogies and stuff, that they are wanting kids to learn, will always come from how their welfare is at school.'

Leadership was considered by the teachers as significant in this process. One stated: 'You know, a lot of this positive approach comes from above us. We just happen to be people who are receptive … So you really have to congratulate the admin on their approach because that allows us to do what we do and know that we will be backed up. I think it is knowing that there is a sincerity and a belief that they are doing it. It is not just 'ticking a box'.'

Barriers to attendance were identified by those interviewed as:

- Financial hardship
- Public transport
- Parenting difficulties
- NAPLAN week
- Domestic violence
- Parent mental illness
- Young people's mental illness (self-harm)
- Alcohol/substance abuse
- Children as carers for parents or they are designated carers
- Trauma
- ESL (English as a Second Language)

6.4.2 Monitoring data

The year level coordinators explained that they meet every two weeks with the deputies to go through the red zone students, whose attendance was below 80% and the yellow zone students, who were around 85% attendance. One stated that:

> I send them onto my Form teachers and ask them to highlight any students that they
>
> think may be of concern; because sometimes the kids will drop down to that yellow

zone and it is just like a holiday or something which can be explained. I will speak to them generally as a group and one by one; and then from there, I will track them and go to emails home or phone calls to parents.

6.4.3 School's definition of absenteeism

The administrative staff reported looking at the breakdown on OneSchool in their definition of chronic absenteeism. However, they emphasised that if that they looked at that 'less than 85%' list, we wouldn't have the improvement plans for all the kids; and we wouldn't have the Form 4 process in place for all of those kids ….
It would be more a case by case basis, the pattern of absenteeism for that kid. '

6.4.4 Changes in data

When discussing the school's improvements, the Principal aligned attendance with other positive outcomes: 'Our attendance is up; our behaviour - we have got virtually no naughty students. Our academic results are up; we get 100% QCE; we had OP 1s'.

6.4.5 Curriculum Framework – Whole school level

The Principal described the process of developing a curriculum framework as part of improving attendance:

> 'So it was going right back to a really clear framework, to achieve success. One of the foundations to that framework was a culture that promotes learning. So we went right back and unpacked, What does that look like? What should that look like in our school?' That involved the work with my executive team, my leadership team; all of the school staff. This framework was connected to both students and the broader community. And then really promoting that in our community, some real clear expectations around what we expect; what was our culture that promotes learning; so what were our school values; what was our vision/motto. I spent a lot of time with students and community really talking about our values, our vision and our motto. So we did a lot of work around that.'

Accordingly, the core tenets of the curriculum framework were: Embracing Knowledge, Empowering Teaching and Learning and Engaging the Community (see Figure 37).

Figure 37 Curriculum framework developed by the school
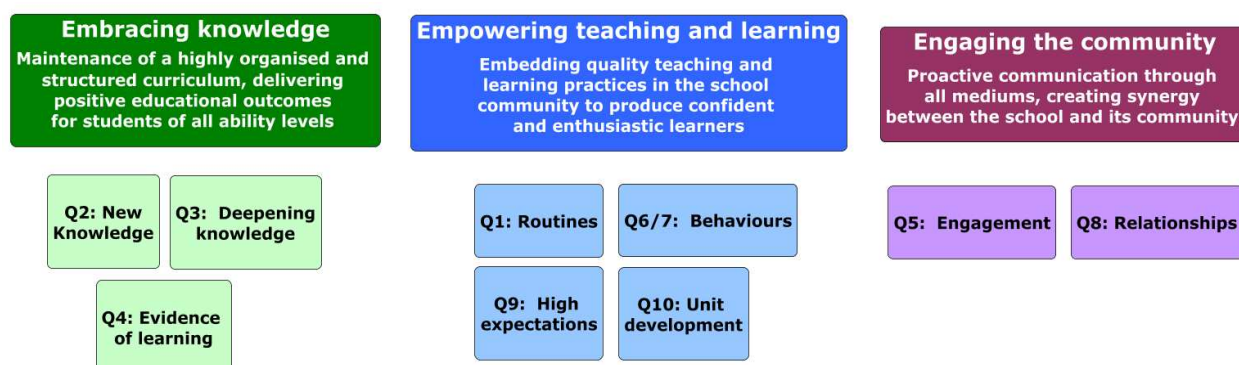
6.4.6 Team

In operationalising the school philosophy, the Deputy Principal indicated that the school-wide process had three main components comprised of the communication; rewards; and data subgroups. This notion of 'team' was frequently used in the context of collaborations, literacy and reading, sharing of professional practice and student support services.

6.4.7 Leadership

Across the school there was an emphasis on shared leadership that was seen as being inclusive and recognising professional autonomy. This was evident in the Principal's assertion that 'I don't micro manage'. She went on to add that, 'One of the biggest successes for us is our relational leadership; the way we work with one another. We are all focussed on the same thing. We get along famously when it comes to our professional work; we respect what each other does.' Reflecting this focus, the teachers and staff undertook regular professional development on leadership.

6.4.8 Student leadership

The school had Year 11 prefects who met with the Year 11 Coordinator weekly. Part of their role was to be a support for peer mentors, and for leadership.

6.4.9 Embracing knowledge

Links to deepening knowledge were evident in the school's partnership with Michael Fullan's 'New Pedagogies for Deep Learning'. This influenced the value teachers placed on their own learning (see later examples).

6.4.10 Empowering teaching and learning

The Principal's question, 'How do we engage our students; not just in curriculum in the classroom and pedagogy and those experiences, but school as a whole?' linked directly to the school's vision of 'a supportive, innovative community of learners.' For this school attendance was linked to learning.

Restorative process as an approach was advocated by the Administrative Officer, who made follow-up calls to parents in regards to absenteeism: 'We don't give up on kids – sometimes the restorative process isn't just one meeting; it is more interventions and kids have to communicate if there's still problems. Normally, there's a follow-up check-in, if you had a meeting with a couple of kids; you know, a couple of weeks later or a week later, 'How is that going? Is it still going okay?' If it's not, then there's more work to be done.'

The Principal noted the importance of supporting all students: 'when the kids are at school, they know that the teachers, the school/community really believes in their learning and supports them in their learning' (Principal).

One Deputy Principal led the work around positive behaviour in relation to attendance, while the other led the pedagogical framework and the implementation of the 'Art of Science and Teaching and the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning.'

Empowering teaching and learning through leadership was exemplified by creating a range of 'enrichment' strategies, 'that makes our kids come to school … making things a little bit more exciting; and engaging our kids; in the classrooms and then also extra-curricular activities' (Deputy Principals and HOD HPE).

6.4.11 Engaging the community

A member of the Support Team noted that their approach to attendance was meant to be seen in a positive light: 'It's a friendly/community sort of approach rather than a policing approach'. There was a reciprocal element to this process which was reflected in the following: 'how we can give back to the community … the community does a lot for the school' (Deputy Principals and HOD HPE interview). This was supported by the Principal who stated that:

I could see that the school/community had the foundations to achieve so much more than what it was. The school just needed to be embraced and needed someone to remind everybody of how great this school and the students and the community were, and what the potential was to achieve more.'

This linked back to the school's philosophy of going beyond attendance. The Principal made the point that the school's focus is 'not just attendance, it's also 'promoting [the school] out in our community. We are getting the school out there as much possible … so communication with parents, electronic information, stuff on Facebook what's happening. Our local politicians, I jump on them as much as I can and just promote the school.'

6.4.12 Case management and linking outwards with external agencies

Frequent references were made to a case by case management approach. The Student Support Team, comprised of the School-based Police Officer, the Guidance Officer and the Student Support Officer were the 'go-to' place for students. They indicated that, 'We work, the three of us, really well; and then with the deputies … our role is a bit blurred at times, as to who is responding to what. I think sometimes it is a best fit. Who has the best relationship with that student, is the person that deals with an issue.' The Student Support Team also worked in collaboration with the Administrative Officer, who was responsible for preparing letters to parents about attendance. The case by case approach is illustrated in the following:

She [Admin Officer] doesn't just send out her letters based on that process … she prepares them but then she will bring us a list and we will talk about case by case. 'Oh, yeah, why is that student coming up?' So it's about knowing our kids. 'Do we want to send that?' 'No, we don't. We know that this is going on.' The attendance necessarily doesn't always match the story about what's going on behind it. (Support Team)

The Principal highlighted the importance of 'wrap around services': 'we work with different groups that might support students at risk; like our employment services, employment agencies; people that do apprenticeships/traineeships. Some of our

students, as they start to get in that age group, working with them around some work experience. So we have got a lot of businesses who support us for work experience, as well.' One Year 9 student described his experience during the following exchange:

> I don't know if any other schools get to do work experience in Year 9, but I got to. I got told that not many other schools got to do it, but I got offered it … He's (Student Support Officer) the one that got me work experience. He helps me out. He helped me out with my resume and all that sort of stuff. Whenever I am having a bad time or anything, he always helps me out; having home problems; he's always been there for me.
>
> *Would you say that he was one the reasons why you have come back after doing work experience?*
>
> Yep.

The staff also described engaging the following agencies:

- Department of Community Services
- YARN (Youth At Risk Network),
- PCYC (Police Citizens Youth Club)
- The local retirement village
- The local Neighbourhood House (assistance with domestic violence, crisis food and bills)
- PRADO (Partnership Response At Domestic Violence)
- Local Youth Centre
- BOOYAH, referred to as an Indigenous program for at-risk Indigenous students (a police-run leadership and mentor program that utilises adventure-based learning, decision-making/problem solving exercises, resilience training, policing strategies and family inclusive principles to help young people aged 15-16 years make better life choices)
- CYMHS (Child and Youth Mental Health Service)
- Centrelink.

The school employed a range of strategies to encourage attendance and engagement. However, it was emphasised that this was being refined all the time to ensure strategies are effective.

Case management was the only context in which cultural diversity was discussed during the interviews: 'where those cultural differences come in, is where those cases require more support' (Deputy Principals and HOD HPE).

6.4.13 Rewards

There were a number of reward systems in operation at the school.

VivoClass, advertised on the website as a 'skills and character building platform', was described by students as 'a reward system; you can buy stuff on the computers at school'. Students gave examples of rewards they enjoyed, such as rocky road chocolate; bats and balls; a VIP seat (deck chair and popcorn) at parade; or an iPad.

One student explained that she had been saving her Vivo points so that she could choose lunch with the Principal as a reward: 'I have been hanging out to buy the lunch with the Principal; and it's been unavailable since Term 3. I am waiting for it to come back again, so I can buy it …I think it is just an interesting connection; you know, getting to know your teachers and getting to know the people around you ... And I find that really enjoyable; especially the fact that it is a free lunch.' The Deputy Principal identified lunch with Principal as one of the Vivo rewards that were linked to the school values. These were known as 'our TRICP values' - 'trust, respect, integrity, commitment and passion.'

Attendance at major events, such as the Year 12 formal and work experience required 90% or higher attendance. In relation to sport, one student gave the following example: 'Well, with rugby... you have to have 90% to come and do the event and stuff, which is good; like, it motivates us to come to school.'

6.4.14 FOMO: 'Fear of Missing Out'

There were a series of events held randomly at the school. The intention of these were that students would have a 'fear of missing out on them' if they were absent. They were

explained thus: 'So our Chaplain has some connections and she brought in a band, who played at lunchtime; and they set up picnic blankets out on the grass. We have had BMX stunt people come in and dance crews and things like that. So we just advertise that, 'There is an event coming soon. You never know what it is going to be.' (Deputy Principals and HOD HPE)

The students gave their perspective on the FOMO events: 'They are pretty interesting, too. Like, I love to go to them; you know, watching people do skate stuff and music events; and they put all the beanbags out and the picnic rugs. We sit there and we enjoy music and it is really fun.' However, other students, who were identified by the school as experiencing substantial difficulties were unaware of the FOMO program.

6.4.15 Positive Feedback Weeks

The administration team also planned 'Positive Feedback Weeks' during the term; 'we have a real push for positive feedback to parents and kids during that week. So we make phone calls, we have postcards that can go home ... it has photos of our kids with 'well done' on it. And then teachers can write their own personalised message on the back' (Deputy Principal).

6.4.16 Relationship Building

6.4.16.1 'Chat and Chew'

In order to build positive relationships in the school: 'A team of people came up with a thing called 'chat and chew' last year; which sort of fits into that student engagement … at lunchtime … every teacher goes out for the lunch break with their lunch and just sits down next to a group of students or talks to students and they are just called our 'chat and chews'… we try to engage with kids, basically; and we try to have the positives as a focus' (Deputy Principals and HOD HPE).

This strategy was also linked to pedagogy, through the 'Art and Science of Teaching Framework' which incorporated in its design the questions 'what will I do to develop relationships with my students? And what will I do to engage my students effectively?'

During their focus group discussion, the parents indicated that 'if the kids can relate to the teachers and they feel they can talk to them, everything is a lot better for the kids … they feel safe'.

The Year Coordinators also stated that school events, such as the swimming carnival, music festivals, sporting events and school camps were seen as opportunities to build relationships with students.

The nature of student-teacher relationships was demonstrated in the following: 'I was a bit flat when I came to work this morning and a Year 12 student said, 'Are you okay, Miss?' I said, 'Oh, I am just feeling a bit flat.' She sent me an email, with a picture, just giving me a little uplifting message that says, 'Just because you are having a down day' (Deputy Principal).

A 'Random Act of Kindness Week' had been implemented. The recipient of the 'kindness' lets the Deputy Principal know what the Act of Kindness was – 'it could be teachers to teachers, kids, to kids, kids to teachers, anyone' (Deputy Principal). These are collated and shared at parade.

6.4.17 Innovative practices

In order to build relationships amongst teachers, the school developed a program called, 'T for T', 'Teachers for Teachers'.

> We were sick of going to meetings where we were following someone else's agenda … It didn't address your needs … We wanted something where we had control over what it was that we worked on. One of the things we had to look at was how to encourage working with colleagues. So then we came up with this program - where every staff member is responsible for choosing someone else to work with; a group of five or one, but it is their choice of who they work with and what they work on. So it is teacher-led, based on teacher needs; it will arrive at a better outcome (Teacher).

An example of this, was working within the delivery of the Year 9 Science curriculum: 'I would like to improve my resources on that and I know you are doing something fantastic.' … So I am so passionate about what we have come up with as

a model for teacher engagement with each other. I am really excited' (Year 9 teacher).

The parents described an innovative approach to parent/teacher interviews. One parent described it as follows:

> A new thing trialled in Grade 8 … instead of it just being a parent/teacher interview, it was actually a parent/child interview with the teacher there and the child makes a presentation to the parent of 'this is how I am going; there's my results; this is my goal' … it was incredible. I believe they are going to bring it in across the school.

Another innovation was the 'Year 7 parent 'meet the teachers' event ... (it's) always just been a sausage sizzle and a brief talk … they changed it and it was just beautiful. It was all outside with Hospitality students serving wearing beautiful aprons, chef hats …there was a huge turnout of parents; the biggest we ever had … we encouraged our students to bring their parents to us and formally introduce us, so that we could get that dialogue happening … I thought it was a nice change from 'grab a sausage' (Year Coordinators).

6.4.18 How effective are these strategies?

The school's philosophy of not focusing solely on attendance was manifest in the interviews across the school. There was a strong claim that punitive measures are ineffective in addressing absenteeism, as such engagement was the focus.

6.4.19 Student views

While some students identified and engaged with the rewards program, other students, who were identified by the school as experiencing substantial difficulties, were unaware of initiatives such as the FOMO program, despite its promotion within the school.

6.4.20 Teacher views

The teachers experienced a sense of agency, particularly in the T for T program. They also acknowledged the positive approach of the leadership team.

6.4.21 Parent and community views

The parents recognised the innovative approaches of the school staff, such as the parent/ teacher interviews and 'meet the teacher' evenings.

The school's sustained engagement and reciprocal relationships with the broader community were evident. Opportunities for work experience within local community businesses for Year 9 students who were disengaging from school was initiated. The student's response indicated his re-engagement with schooling as a result.

6.4.22 Summary

Improved attendance at this school was the outcome of a range of processes which primarily targeted sustained student engagement, removing the barriers to school attendance, and developing strong reciprocal relationships with the broader community. Central to this approach was inclusive and relational leadership, which focused on teacher autonomy, professional development and research-based practice to develop a clear framework for a school culture that promoted learning. The school's approach to individual case management was based on utilising the expertise of the person within the support team who had the best relationship with the individual students and their philosophy that 'we never give up on kids'.

6.4.23 What have we learnt from this school?

This school demonstrated that an innovative, comprehensive and integrated approach, encompassing relational-based strategies, and a focus on quality curricula and pedagogies, together with a positive school environment, inclusive leadership, teachers' professional autonomy, and team work will not only improve attendance, but students' engagement with their schooling. The staff also emphasised that these improvements not only take time to achieve, having been developed over the course of several years, but require continual refinement.

6.5 Case Study 5

Case Study 5 has an enrolment of 1340 students. The school is located in a very low socio-economic area of Brisbane, with 44% of the school population in the lowest ICSEA quartile and 33% in the lower middle quartile. In Semester 1 2016, the student attendance rate for all students was 91% (85% for Indigenous and 92% for non-Indigenous), and the student attendance level (i.e. proportion of students attending 90% or more) was 73% (54% Indigenous students and 73% non-Indigenous students). In Term 3 2016, the data improved slightly for Indigenous students, with the attendance rate improving to 87% and the attendance level to 56%. The rest remained steady. According to the Deputy Principal, in 2015 the school had just over 50 students that were still sitting on 100% attendance and over 500 students on 95%.

6.5.1 Developing a model

The Principal was very clear in his view that schools need to develop a 'model of practice', and that for them, this model included a whole staff commitment to improving attendance. He stated: 'I think the school needs to have a … clearly stated focus that says, 'This is what we are on about', to guide people and to drive practice.'

There are three core elements to their model which, according to the Principal, consist of:

1) Tracking and targets
2) Spotlighting
3) Celebrating

6.5.2 Tracking and Targets

The school had high expectations in regards to attendance with a target of 95% attendance for all students. In the three years that the current Principal has been at the school, it has only occurred on a weekly basis approximately half a dozen times. However, he was of the view it is important to maintain that expectation, as he stated: 'I don't think that lowering targets works. I think it just sends a message that that is what is acceptable'.

The school was highly committed to tracking attendance and ensuring that students and teachers were very well aware of the data on attendance. Every week, the office sent out a weekly update 'which shows all of the staff in the school, the daily trends of attendance and the weekly trends of attendance by percentage. This was followed up by an extended form

class every four weeks for teachers to go through attendance patterns and students' individual attendance attainment. Students were then expected to record those in their diaries. Students, including those interviewed, were very well aware of their own attendance data. One student during the course of an interview showed us on his laptop what his attendance was up to that date.

There was a strong emphasis placed on 'getting it right' from the beginning of the year. There is concerted effort to identify poor attendance patterns in the first four weeks of school. The Princiapl makes the case that early in the year, four or five days' absence might not seem like a lot but 'all of a sudden they are down to 75%…. Well, it doesn't fix itself and it doesn't correct itself; that's been our experience.'

6.5.3 Consequences of lateness and missed days of school

One of the deputies explained that any student late for school had to go to the Attendance Officer where they received litter duty. If they did not do the duty, they received a lunch time detention and if they did not do that, they received an after-school detention. They also were recorded as having had an absence. For genuine absence there was an 'excusal' process. This required medical certificates, or what was referred to as a 'valid reason' such as a funeral. Holidays with parents did not constitute an excusal. Students and staff were all very well aware of these very clear definitions. The excusal forms had to be applied for, they were not automatic. It was explained that this indicated their commitment to the school and its policies. The school was very careful to pay attention to OneSchool and IDAttend where reasons for absences were recorded. The student diary was really important in that students' individual attendance data was written in the diary every five weeks, and parents were expected to check the diary. On occasions the data were not up to date or there had been errors in the entry. The deputies pointed out that both students and their parents were very quick to pick up on any discrepancies. They indicated that they were pleased with this vigilance as it showed that people were taking the issue seriously.

In the senior years, students signed a contract at the beginning of Year 11 and 12 which indicated an agreed level of attendance. There was a strong view that unless the students attended school regularly they were unlikely to achieve. Regarding absence on the day of exams, the only excuse was 'a medical certificate or it might be an extenuating circumstance, such as a death in the family or something like that'. It did not apply when

'families... just decide to take leave and go on holidays'. As one deputy indicated: 'those are the rules, right from (grades) 7 to 12. 'You be here or it's going to affect you academically.' There is no relaxation with that; and we are very, very strict with that.'

6.5.4 Following up on individual cases

In cases where students were not attending school, multiple people such as year level coordinators, deputies and the Attendance Officer rang home.

The Head of Junior explained how this process worked:

> With my Year 7 team, if they notice a kid is missing from class - like, three days, generally, we give them - and then we ring them and say, 'What's going on? Why isn't the student here?' Unless the student has, perhaps, the day before been very distressed or something and the teacher was concerned; and then they will bring it to my attention. I will contact the family maybe that afternoon or the next day and just sort of say, 'We noticed John is away. One of his teachers said yesterday that he was having a tough day. Is there something that we need to do?'

There were multiple anecdotes provided about the benefits of persisting with both students and their parents in relation to school attendance. In one example, a deputy explained how they had had a student who, when in Year 9, had hated school but had recently graduated and:

> ...she couldn't thank me enough for having been a pain in the backside and - because she had been expelled from the previous school; came to us, hated it; and the fact that we kept hounding her, eventually she realised that we weren't hounding her to be painful; but we were actually hounding her for her own sake; and she graduated. Just so proud that she graduated.

When asked about the types of support that they might provide to students who had anxiety, a common cause of absenteeism, the focus tended to be on the 'excusal process' and they indicated that they allowed for genuine cases. Such cases entailed supplying medical certificates, the involvement of guidance officers, and engagement with parents. However, it was said that 'some people claim they have anxiety issues and things. You look

at the families and the parents are supporting any excuse.' In such cases they instigated the normal sanctions and denial of privileges.

The junior head recounted this story:

> We had one young lady who was not coming to school frequently. We got to the point where we got the GOs (Guidance Officers) involved, got the family involved. It ended up we had a meeting with the Principal, myself - I was Year Coordinator then - with the Head of Junior Secondary, at that stage - with her family, with the family support person who had been helping the person; we had a massive meeting and just sat there together and discussed all the issues with the family, with the student...discussed all these issues. Laid the cards on the table and said, 'You have got to come to school. This is unacceptable.' We dragged her from the car to the office door a couple of times; it is like, 'Come on, let's go.' And really had to coax her out of the car. And that's when we kind of said, 'Enough is enough and had this big meeting.' From that day forward, that girl came to school every single day for the rest of the year. And last year, her attendance percentage was 100%.

The Head of Junior indicated that for some students moving from primary to secondary caused some anxieties, but that they genuinely attempted to keep on top of it by liaising and building relationships with families. They also had some issues with 'school refusers because they are finding the rigidity of the high school very different to some of the primary schools.' However, she was of the view that all the work they had done with the families had served to fix the problems that had arisen.

The Year 7 Coordinator indicated that they explored the circumstances of students' lateness or absences. She spoke of one student who had major caring responsibilities in her family:

> We had a girl this year … consistently has been arriving late; but it is out of her control. You know, it has been because mum and dad can't get her here on time because she has to wait for her other two siblings to get picked up by a bus, to go over to a special school. So that is an exception that we are looking into right now; where we understand there are circumstances there, and are asking 'How can we manipulate this, so she's not being' - you know, she's trying to do the right thing; it is out of her control.

Those students who were chronic absentees were case managed closely by a Deputy Principal with support from the Guidance Officer and Youth Support Coordinator. However, the process was difficult as the Principal indicated 'sometimes these kids are ghosts' in that it was difficult to make contact with them, as their families often did not answer their phones or respond to letters. He was of the view that they had had some successes with individual cases through 'wraparound' support services. However, he also indicated that: 'One of the problems is that there are families and students who just think that 73%, 78% is okay; they will come three days a week. It's about trying to individually case manage them; whatever that means.'

The school did send Form 4 and the Form 5 letters to parents/carers which were sometimes effective in triggering dialogue. However, the Principal was of the view that there was little point to them as they were rarely followed through.

6.5.5 Responding to diversity

The school had a relatively large multicultural population. However, there were no specific targeted cultural programs. The Principal was of the view that this lowers expectations for such groups which was not in their best interests. He explained:

> What I think works is whole school culture. So, it doesn't matter whether you are Ukrainian, Samoan, Vietnamese or Australian, you are a [local area] kid. So, when you ask what I don't think works, …I don't think it's effective to go into these specific cultural targeted process like multicultural day for the Samoans and then, you know, Tongan Day and this sort of thing.

The deputies too were adamant that the school policies applied to everyone and that there was no need for different strategies. However, one deputy did relay some areas where they had to treat each case on its merits:

> We do have a bit of an issue sometimes - it's a hard one - a lot of the Islander people will go back for funerals for long periods of time. So it is really hard to judge - like, 'is two weeks reasonable for going away for a funeral?' For some cultures, it would be; in other cultures, you sort of wonder: 'is it just a holiday?' It is a really grey area. Got to go with each, one by one.

In relation to the school's approximately 60 Indigenous students, they acknowledged country 'at every opportunity', engaged with NAIDOC programs and Queensland Health's 'deadly choices program'. However, the Principal noted,

> …we still say, 'You are a [local area] kid, and our culture is [local] culture and we expect you to fit with our, you know, everyone to fit in under the same umbrella'. We don't have separate targets for Indigenous kids and as a result, on the whole, they demonstrate to us the same patterns as the rest of the kids.

The school had had an Indigenous Liaison Officer, but she had left the previous year. This person liaised with Elders, called homes when students did not come to school, sometimes she would organise Elders to go and get students from home. And one teacher indicated: 'Because nine times out of ten, once they are here, they are here; they are fine. But it is getting them here'.

The school did not have many students who 'go off the radar'. However, they acknowledged that it was difficult for them to track some students. A Deputy gave the following example:

> We had one student last year who disappeared to Cherbourg, near Murgon there, and I couldn't prove or disprove; I couldn't get hold of the parents. All I could do was flick it up the ladder a bit and say, 'The student is off the radar. Please, keep your eyes open.' I couldn't even take her off the books, there's nothing that I can do; no phone numbers worked; none of the relatives knew where he was; and it does happen.

However, it was claimed that they made every effort to ensure that they knew where the student had gone. This included talking to their friends and asking them to check on Facebook accounts, contacting the Department of Child Safety, conducting home visits and contacting other relatives (siblings, grandparents etc.).

6.5.6 Spotlighting

Every student at the school was expected to be aware of their attendance percentage. This percentage gave students access to 'special privileges' - extra-curricular sporting and social activities. The cut-off point was 95%, which was the school's target. There was space to take into account 'genuine illnesses' with a medical certificate. The Principal considered

that this target had been highly effective: 'It's teaching kids about responsibility of meeting targets and if you don't, going through a process to explain why (not)'. He went on to say:

> There is a very strong body of evidence through the school wide positive behaviour support process that says that students should be able to predict with 100% accuracy the consequences for their behaviour actions. You know, they should know if they do x, it will result in y. We have tried to apply that to our attendance expectations. Every kid in this school knows the school target is 95%, they know their own individual current percentage of attendance and they know what the actions for attending and non-attending are.

The school did try to make sure that students were aware as to why they had these targets through a process referred to as 'linking'. The Principal explained: 'Linking is about making sure the students are aware of the detrimental effects of having poor attendance. So, we talk very explicitly with them about the need to be here and that 95% plus… impacts on their learning, what they miss, what they don't gain if they are absent.' This 'linking' also related to the relationship between attendance and privileges. This included the Grade 12 school formal and graduation. As a consequence, the Principal indicated:

> So, in my school my best attending level is Grade 12 and that's not always the case, but that's because the Grade 12s absolutely know that their attendance is so strongly linked to their participation in formal, participation in graduation, participation in the fun things at the end of Grade 12 that they want to access. So, we do that. So, I guess the concept of linking is about making sure that the spotlight is shone on it at all times.

The school was very strict around its cut offs. One of the deputies noted in relation to extra-curricular activities that: 'we calculate; do a percentage; and if it is 94.2, too bad. So they just don't go.'

Spotlighting also involved shining a light on the attendance of 'worst to best' form classes. The data used to indicate these were displayed on the weekly assembly for all to see. The result was a weekly challenge amongst form classes with various rewards associated with 'doing well'.

6.5.7 Celebrations and awards

The school highlighted its celebration and awards for high attendance, especially for those who achieved 95% and above attendance levels. The Principal was adamant that their approach of celebration and awards worked, although he acknowledged that some saw it as punitive. He refuted this suggestion saying: 'it's not punitive; it's actually rewarding those students who attend'. He said, in contrast to a student who may have not met the 95% target because of a broken leg:

> ...the child whose attendance is 92% and the 3% below 95 we can see that they just haven't bothered getting themselves out of bed and they are late. To me, they don't deserve to be rewarded … which is why – as I have said, we are very proud of our above 95% percentage which is just over 50%, which is 10/11 points higher than the State average because I think we have said to our community, 'Attendance is important. We expect you to be here'. And, I don't think a softly, softly approach around those sort of things works.

He provided an example of a student who he thought should not be rewarded:

> There was a case study kid who has got 85% attendance and is never absent on Wednesdays though, because he loves playing touch football. Why should he get to go and represent the school and play touch football when he hasn't bought into what we are trying to do; that's our approach and on the most part it works.

It was also made clear that students were never denied access to curriculum-related excursions or activities; such events, according to teachers, were never 'jeopardised'.

There were many aspects to the award system. For example, students who had 100% attendance were rewarded with an end of term Principal's morning tea, and USBs, whilst others might receive rubbers and pencils. They also gave out certificates to those with 95% and above attendance. Students and teachers alike highlighted to researchers that those who had a 100% attendance had gone into a draw for a laptop. One deputy noted that in the previous year that they had had

> … something like 22 students who had attended 100% of the time, the entire year;
> not late to school, not out for a medical appointment here, entirely; and there was
> a major draw and that was a thousand-dollar laptop.

The school also had a 'Qantas' style gold/silver style ID card system indicating high level attendance. Those students on 95% attendance receive a silver card and those on 100%, receive gold. One teacher was of the view that ensuring students regularly attended could be as 'simple as saying, 'You were here. Because of that, we are acknowledging that and we are going to give you something.' It can be as small as the ID card.'

A recently introduced celebratory reward was an end of year 'carnival' for all of those who had an attendance rate of 95% and above. Attendance at this carnival was dependent upon a 95% rate or above with no exceptions – even for 'excused' attendance. The carnival was held on the last day of school for two periods and involved such things as rock climbing, a 30 metre obstacle course, laser tag; a variety of activities, plus popcorn. Only those students who were above 95% were able to participate; they also received a T-shirt that read '95' or '100%'.

The Deputy Principal who organised the event stated that: 'it was just really an opportunity to reward those students for having such excellent attendance. As far as we are aware, we are the only school in our region that has put on such an event for students, for this particular reason. So we are going to do it again this year.' This Deputy also indicated that Year 7s arriving at the school were already talking about this year's carnival and how they were going to try and make sure that they could attend, and consequently: 'they are going to be monitoring their own attendance to be able to participate in this activity; which is a win/win for everyone.'

For one of the deputies, the changes that they had made had become so ingrained and explained so well that for many of the older students, the rewards were inconsequential and that they 'now will talk to you about the value of attending, rather than worrying about going to the carnival or anything else'. In relation to some of the students who qualified but decided to not attend the carnival he said: 'I tried to encourage them and they said, 'oh, no, we know we have been here; we know that we get the benefit''.

In line with notions of consistency about all policies and practices in the school was the school's vison. As one Deputy said in relation to their attendance strategy:

> One of the things that stuck to me about the attendance - and it goes with everything we do - it's all locked into this overarching thought about 'why are we here; the importance of being here', and all of that. Sometimes, it's difficult to take attendance as a separate thing and take it away from the whole package that we present. It is one of the parts of the whole package. If another school wanted to introduce it, I think they could follow the steps that we have done for the attendance, but they may not get the full benefit that we have got because it's a part of a whole package.

The leadership team was aware that attendance is interrelated with other practices that are important for the school. As one deputy indicated: 'if someone is misbehaving and they are not in the classroom - we are allowing for a calm and conducive learning environment for students. And that's what students want. Obviously, they will want to come to school more often, if they feel like they are in that type of environment that is going to allow them to learn.'

One problem area they saw was the failure on the part of students that came to them from other high schools to 'buy in' to their approach: 'You try to encourage and get them to get to there, but they live in this totally different world.'

The message throughout the school was always consistent. As one deputy stated: 'X is having that conversation as a Deputy Principal. You know, Head of Departments have that conversation with the students. Year Level Coordinators have those conversations. Teachers have those conversations. The students are accessing the same, consistent message'. The other deputy then added that the students were 'drowned in it' and that was why they had been so successful.

As indicated above, there was recognition within the senior team and teachers that attendance in and of itself should not be the aim of their policies, but learning. This also led to discussions about the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and attendance.

6.5.8 Addressing the Curriculum

When asked how important curriculum was for encouraging students to attend school, the issue of 'school tone' was raised. The Principal spoke of the need for students to feel safe, for rules to be consistent and hence fair, to have high uniform standards, and high expectations for punctuality. He expected this to apply to all classrooms. They sought consistency across classrooms with the 'dimensions of learning' as their pedagogical framework, together with a consistent assessment policy across Years 7-12. He went on to say:

> So, we try to be very consistent and I think when kids walk through the gate in the morning feeling confident that they are going to be delivered a product that they are comfortable with, I think we have a better chance of getting them here than if they are not sure what they are going to get when they turn up.

There was a view that having achieved a significant change in attendance patterns left more time for curriculum matters and that attendance 'is just a matter of keeping an eye on it'. Hence, as one deputy stated, 'We are spending time on reading frameworks and things like that, which really do have an outcome that's directly there. I mean, the other thing, if they not here, then we can't sort of go with them.'

The staff acknowledged that their system of rewards and sanctions was not the only factor that impacted upon attendance. There were also concerns related to pedagogy. As the Principal indicated: 'if the pedagogy doesn't capture them the students will vote with their feet'. He had noticed that students were now more likely to truant more in classes than from school – although he emphasised, 'Not in my school, but it happens.'

The Head of Junior drew attention to posters around the school that emphasised the links between attendance and outcomes: 'If you are two minutes late every day, that equates to this much time every week, and this much time every month. She was of the view that students were really receptive to the message about the relationship between outcomes and attendance.

Interestingly, the school had cut back on vocational education and training (VET). The deputies expressed concern that having one day away from school a week to acquire a VET certificate impacted upon other marks. The only students still allowed to attend VET courses

were those whose attendance and marks had not deteriorated. This, according to two of the deputies, had also worked to improve attendance and academic grades across the school.

The Principal considered that within the OP process, students who did not achieve a 1-15 were seen as a failure and hence directed towards certificate courses. However, in his view: 'A kid from [the local area], who comes out of a challenging home, takes six authority subjects, gets Cs in them and engages in that rich learning for two years; and then gets an OP of 18 - they are not a failure.'

In order for their framework to be successful, they have had to ensure 'buy-in' from the community/parents, teachers and students. This had not always been easy, and had taken time to accomplish.

6.5.9 Parent/community responses

The introduction of the school's approach to attendance had not been without controversy or resistance. The hard line that they had taken around attendance has meant that they have had to 'have very fierce conversations with parents at times; that, 'this is the rule, this is the way.'' One deputy indicated that they had had 'battles with pockets of community, really strong battles.' This had led to some parents taking their children out of the school. However, this had been counteracted by parents now wanting to bring their children back to the school. In some cases, students had wanted to come back after 6-12 months away. In such instances, one deputy said: 'we are going, 'Hang on, you didn't want to buy into our policy then. Are you going to buy into it now? Because we haven't changed. We want the same things'.'

The Principal said of his approach that he had been prepared to have 'one big brawl' to 'just get it sorted.' And then they could move on. However, this had meant that the deputies have had to hold the line and not make special deals with families. As one Deputy indicated: '… this is what we say to families when we enrol them, we actually do say this: 'We mean what we say. So we have gone through all our policies with you and if you don't think that [our school] is the school for you, then please don't enrol here.'' This has resulted in complaints made by parents to the DET regional office. However, the school's use of data enabled them to respond to both the regional office and the community, as the Principal was able to tell them, as one Deputy told us: ''No, this is where we are going. Here's the

data to prove I am right.'' The school had also found the systematic use of OneSchool beneficial when attempting to track a student's history if they had come from another school. The Principal stated that:

> …by and large every single family that we ever have a meeting with around attendance says the same thing. 'The kid is having anxiety.' 'The kid is being bullied.' You know, whatever the reason is, 'We have got financial issues'. And, 'The kid's attendance has always been good in the past.'

However, when they looked at 'OneSchool' the pattern seemed to have been evident in primary or a previous school. He stated, 'I have never met a kid who had exceptional attendance and then all of a sudden got to Grade 8 and it dropped off.'

The community appeared to have swung behind the Principal. A Deputy told us:

> I think over time, in the last year, that sort of flack has dropped right off. The community is now on side, rather than working against us. And the community is very proud of their school being considered… the best school in this area; so it is actually getting a groundswell behind us.

The Head of Junior indicated that some parents 'jack up and get annoyed' if they take the students on holidays during term time because it is cheaper and the student appears to be punished as a consequence. However, she was also of the view that most parents get it and 'understand the fact that … a lack of attendance is affecting their students' learning'. This view was confirmed by the deputies who were convinced that many parents had now bought into the school's model. One story relayed by a deputy involved a conversation with a parent and student at the school gate: 'I just went out and spoke to mum and the oldest one, who is now in Year 11, said to me, 'Oh, I went to another school for 18 months and I couldn't wait to come back here because I know this is good; and everybody wants to see me every day at school.'   He went on: 'I think mum even said, 'You push them in that proper direction all the time. My job at home is easy. I don't have to fight with them as much.' I just went, 'Good, that's what we want'. Got to have the team working; otherwise if the team is not working, then we give away.'

One Year Coordinator spoke of the many phone calls she made home and how this helped to build relationships with the parents. She said of these calls:

> And it is anything simple from, 'You know what, your child has arrived late to school every single day this week. Is there something going on at home that's preventing them from getting here? Are you aware that they are arriving at school every day late?' Just so that they know that we are actually monitoring that; that we are not just thinking their child is a number at a school and they are blending in; but they stand out to us and that we are concerned.

6.5.10 Teacher Responses

While there appeared to have been some initial resistance from staff, most teachers in the study were supportive of the school's policies. One sports teacher did indicate that whilst there had been concern about the sustainability of sports teams with the attendance requirements, these had not been realised and those most at risk 'generally don't fall below'. He was relieved though that the Principal was the one who told the students if they had not met the criteria. One teacher indicated that she thought that the students really thrived on the competitive nature of the data reporting and prizes associated with it. Staff also appeared supportive of their involvement in the monitoring of data. One teacher reported that: 'Staff have embraced it. I have not spoken to anyone who has gone, 'Oh, this attendance thing. It is too onerous on us''.

Another teacher indicated that now students 'owned the attendance; and they continue to own the attendance now. It's been really successful.' The Year 12 Coordinator, who spoke highly of her cohort of students, indicated that the sanction and rewards, especially around the formal did motivate them. One teacher was also of the view that the parents liked the boundary setting and this that it made their lives easier: 'They like to have a clear-cut set of, you know, 'This is the rules. If you don't get this, this is the consequences. It makes it very simple, from our point of view in dealing with the students/parents.'

There were some reservations though. Some teachers commented on the highly competitive nature of some of the students (and in some cases teachers) which led to tensions in the class. For example, one noticed that in some cases where students had genuine reasons for being absent, other students became very critical. She spoke of one of

the students who had been in her class who was often unwell: 'You know, you would mark the roll, 'Oh, X is not here again. I know she's not sick', 'Can she move classes?'' She went on: 'They would say things like, 'Y's gone overseas on holidays with his parents for five weeks. Does that affect our attendance percentage?' And we would say, 'Yeah, it does. Sorry.' 'Oh, that's not fair''.

Another teacher found the rigidity a little difficult at times. This person provided the following anecdote:

> My heart breaks for them sometimes when it was something like they were late to school. At the end of the year, we reward 100% attendance; it is a huge thing; they get to go into a raffle, last year, it's laptops. And we had one student who was a minute late for the entire year, a minute, and that took them out of the running for 100%. This brought them down to 99.9, whatever it was. But that broke my heart because, you know, you are late sometimes, I understand; but if we have the policy, that is just the way we are pushing it.

One teacher, when discussing the formal, spoke of how he loved attending the event and seeing the students celebrate. This person found the harshness a little difficult to deal with when students were unable to go:

> I have dealt with kids in class, coming to class, after being told, 'I can't go to the formal'. And they are upset; like, they are gutted. Some of the kids have already bought the dress; they have got a boyfriend or someone that they are going to take with them.

However, it was also indicated that there was often a way around decisions made against going to the formal, because 'parents ring up or whatever'. It was also claimed that the Principal says, ''Look, what's the situation? Okay, well, it's been this and this. You still get to go.'' So for this person the situation was 'not always clear-cut'.

Similar comments were made about graduation, especially in relation to those students for whom 'they are the first ones in their family to finish Year 12' and 'walking across that stage means a lot to that family'. One person commented in relation to graduation:

So you do see students - and especially if they are told, let's say it's Term 3, 'You are not going,' then they are not going to make an effort. Once you have been told, they think, 'Well, what's the point?' So that then affects behaviour, their morale, their own self-confidence as a person ... That, to me, I find is harsh.

One teacher explained that he had spoken to students who were ill but had come to school because 'I can't be away for attendance.' Whilst this did raise concerns about the spreading of illnesses and not being in the student's best interest, he also said that it had meant that the students also pushed through when they were a bit headachy. This he thought was good for them: 'Because in the workforce, regardless if it is an academic workplace or trade, something, if you are away too much, then it's not a good look and potentially jeopardises your future'.

Many teachers spoke of the ways in which attendance and learning go hand in hand and had improved the learning at the school. One senior teacher spoke of the strengths of the Principal having formalised the pedagogy through introducing the Dimensions of Learning school-wide. She indicated that this was especially important for new teachers 'so they have very clear - what they call 'the effective classroom management process''. When asked about the ways in which quality curriculum and pedagogies were used to justify attendance, one teacher explained that the Principal 'speaks at length about that and so do the deputies on parades; so do our year coordinators; so do staff.'

6.5.11 Student responses

Two groups of students were spoken with: a younger group with six students in Years 7-10 with an equal gender balance, and an elder group of six consisting of primarily girls with three from Year 12, one from each of Years 7, 10 and 11. The Year 7 was the only boy.

The younger group all knew about the prizes, laptops, Principal morning teas, and the carnival. One of the students had been to the carnival. However, they also indicated that students wanted to go to school because they want a good education. They also listed classes that made them want to attend. These included: Arts and Drama ('because we get to work in groups'), Physical Education, Metalwork ('I just love creating stuff and learning about new ideas'), Home Economics and ICT ('because you can be in groups and just experiment with different things').

Many of the younger students who had very high attendance indicated that the reasons why they came to school regularly was not because of the school's policy but because of their futures ('my parents have told me, like, even just in primary school, they have always told me, 'If you go to school, you can go to uni.' And I have always wanted to go to uni'), their friends ('if they are not here, I would have a horrible day'), and/or because they have no choice ('because my parents make me').

While most of the students appeared supportive of the school's policies on attendance, some had raised various issues. One younger student spoke disappointingly about how he had 'missed out on getting 100% attendance because I was away on the first day of school.' This was a consequence of his mother not bringing them back from their holiday in time. Other students indicated how they had missed out on 100% for various medical reasons and had lost their medical certificates.

When asked why students might not attend, some students indicated that bullying in Year 7 made it difficult for some to attend 'like, if you were being bullied, for example, the day before, you might not want to come for the day after that.' Some students thought that 'if the teachers are more laid-back, it's definitely a more comfortable environment' other students might be better attenders. Some also thought that improving the grounds of the school would help students want to come to school.

The older students tended to be a bit more critical. They could see an upside and downside to the school policy on attendance, of which they were all very well aware. One stated for example:

> Well, I think it's stupid how sometimes you have to prove that you are sick; and it's like they don't really believe you, that you are sick. You have to go to the doctor's and get a medical certificate; and sometimes it can be hard, working around parents working as well; just out of the way. But then again, it does improve things; because it does make people come to school, so they can participate in interschool sport, for example. So it is a two-sided type thing.

One student explained that her parents had chosen to take a family holiday during the school term, and as a result she had missed out on extra-curricular activities, even though she had no control over this decision. Some students spoke of how they felt hounded by

their teachers and how that pushes people away from wanting to come to school. One stated:

> No-one wants to be pressured into anything. Like, no-one likes the rules; and there's no lenience around them. I think that makes a lot of people not want to come to school.

Another student said:

> I think they focus too much on attendance, when they should be focussing on other things as well. So, they focus way too much on attendance, when they should be focussing on what students learn and how they learn and what they are learning is correct.

Competition between classes was not a big thing for the older students, although some of the middle year grades indicated that it was for their teachers: 'teachers go, 'Oh, look, we are first. That's good. But you need to bring up your friends. You need to be the highest grade.' Because if you do poorly, they (teachers) pressure you into doing better.'

Some of the older students also saw that the focus on whether or not students would miss out on activities in relation to events like the formal took away from the educative purposes of schooling. Hence, one student explained that for many students: 'You are not trying to go to school; you are trying to go to the formal'.

There was also a sense amongst the older students that the school did not take account of some of the difficulties in their lives:

> … because life happens; things happen around you all the time, that are going to impact you. Like, for example, a funeral, if you go to a funeral and take a couple of days off to mourn/grieve, you have got to actually go to a Principal and get an excusal form and they consider whether it gets accepted or not. Like, the consideration is what bugs me the most; is the fact that I have to prove to you where I was at what time. Like, again, it is just the structure; it is really intense.

Another student noted:

…most of us are under age, under 18. So we can't stay at home by ourselves. So it's out of our control. If our parents want to go to Fiji for a week, for example, like one of my friends just done, it is out of our control. We don't have a choice. We can't be like, 'Oh, can you postpone it until school holidays?' Like, they have booked the flights; we have to go and that's it.

6.5.12 Leadership

In all of the interviews, it became apparent that 'leadership' was key to the success of the approaches at the school. For example, a deputy stated in response to why had they been so successful in improving attendance: 'obviously having someone who believes in what we are trying to achieve and pushing that agenda; but believing in it, knowing that that's what is in the best interests for the students.' Another deputy indicated that their success was down to an exceptional Principal. This person went on to say: 'because without him, we wouldn't have the support to be able to - and we have absolute confidence that if we highlight something is occurring, that he will support us. So that filters right down through the line.' A significant component of this leadership was in the selling of it to staff and the community. As this deputy indicated, the importance of 'having staff believe with what our agenda is trying to be; and making sure that they buy in that, the community buys in it and we have got consistency with our practice, with good strategies.' The Principal also noted that 'the Principal has to lead the agenda.'

The significance of leadership was raised by many of the teachers too. The strictness and consistency of the Principal has, according to some teachers, made 'our job a lot easier' because they know that in relation to behaviour issues that 'you know you have his backing to remove them which, when you have some hard classes, that's comforting to know.' This teacher liked the Principal's notion of 'The standard you accept, is the standard you walk past'. Another stressed the importance of consistency and accountability. He went on to say that the Principal had 'not been afraid to assert his authority and have a polite/friendly conversation with a teacher or any member of staff to say, 'That actually wasn't what we agreed on.' He was of the view that such 'accountability has made a difference'. He spoke of the Principal's 'very direct style leadership' and that 'he won't walk past anything.' However, he also wanted to make sure that credit was directed towards teachers too: 'So

I'm not going to give him all the credit, but he's led the organisation into where we are now.'

One teacher who had been at the school a long time noted how the constant change of principals before the current one had undermined reforms. He indicated that, 'There had been a period of eight/nine years, where … the school had acting, acting, acting'. This had left the staff 'change-weary.' For this teacher, he liked the way that the Principal had been very systematic in the change process. He thought that this had led into some 'very clear pedagogical expectations to do with our Dimensions of Learning Framework.' Other teachers also spoke of how he 'has been the longest Principal here for a while' and 'it was like a revolving door'. Teachers who had been at the school a long time spoke of the 'massive improvement in students and expectations' since the appointment of the current Principal.

The deputies also highlighted that it is not just the Principal who needs to be committed to the strategy but also the leadership team. One stated: 'the leadership group needs to live, eat, breathe attendance for at least 18 months/two years, until you - you know, because of the single-mindedness, get it in line and then other things will follow.' The deputies also highlighted the 'trust' that existed amongst them all.

6.5.13 Summary

It was clear that the success of this school had been driven by the Principal, who was highly committed to increasing attendance, not just for its own sake but to ensure good outcomes for all students. Underpinning this approach was a commitment to high expectations and consistency. The work in having this 'normalised' within the school had been enormous and one shared by deputies, year coordinators, and teachers alike.

The continued tracking of data and focus on sharing attendance data meant that all within the school were aware of how they were travelling against high expectations, and the consistency of approach in terms of measuring those data meant that students and teachers were aware of the consequences of either achieving or not achieving targets. There appeared to be widespread support amongst staff for the approach, although some did see the approach as a little harsh at times, older students seemed a little more critical of the approach and did indicate that it could 'turn them off school' in the long run.

However, the careful collection of data at the school would seem to indicate that the approach has been working.

6.5.14 What have we learnt from this school?

This school's success in achieving improved attendance stems from a commitment to high expectations, consistency in utilising the school's model of practice and sharing data with students and parents. The importance of teamwork and whole school ownership of improving student attendance was also evidenced in the workload associated with this goal.

6.6 Case Study 6

Case Study 6 is located in the Northern suburbs of a Metropolitan area and is a mid-size primary school with a long history of providing education in the region. It is centrally located and draws students from the surrounding catchment area. In line with the current emphasis on attendance, the school had a robust policy which actively promoted each student attending school every day. According to the Principal, the processes that encourage this attendance were developed and refined over a number of years and are indicative of a whole school approach to education. A key feature was recognising the individual challenges to school attendance for *each* student and assisting the student and family overcome these barriers.

The school had an identifiably low ICSEA accompanied by attendant social issues identified by the administration and teaching staff during the school visit. These included domestic violence, transience, transportation issues, involvement in the criminal justice system, inadequate access to resources (food, uniforms), psychological problems, learning disabilities and cultural factors. These issues were recognised by the school, however, not used as vindication for lower attendance rates. In fact, there was an active mindset within the school that set out to challenge any preconceived notions that the school, and the people within, could not make a difference. This philosophy began with the long serving Principal and permeated through both the teaching and non-teaching staff. The Principal provided the following understanding:

> We as a team have worked really hard over a long period of time to actually build a culture of 'this is how it happens at [our school], this is the way we behave, this is what's accepted and this is what is not accepted'. And so our school's reputation is really quite different now. It still has its issues, but it is more highly regarded within the community than it was ten years ago.

There was an articulated expectation that everyone was working towards the same goals and this was evident across the school. The Deputy Principal described it as 'being there…being there for the kids. Knowing the child …knowing the students on a deeper level'. This student focused philosophy, combined with a number of organisational routines and practical initiatives contributed to an overall increase in attendance across the school.

Interviews with the Principal and Deputy Principal indicated that these processes were time consuming; however, the consistent message was about relationship building, with the students, with parents, the community and with each other.

6.6.1 Strategies

The school had implemented a number of frequently articulated strategies that promoted school attendance on a whole school basis, within the classroom and at an individual student level.

6.6.2 Whole School approaches

The Principal was open about monitoring the school attendance data as part of the school's 'explicit school improvement agenda'. Improving student attendance rates was part of the school's 2017 focus and was exhibited in every classroom on a coloured poster. The attendance data were regularly brought to staff meetings and discussed. Teachers were asked what they were doing about it, what practices were working within the school and what was working in other circumstances. This monitoring extended to families and in response to the departmental expectation that parents be made aware their child was absent; and an administrative person had been employed to make personal phone calls to parent/carers to enquire about absent students. The Principal and deputies were also trialling making these follow up phone calls themselves. This had a twofold outcome. First, finding out why the student was absent, and secondly, the personal contact that was made with the parent was said to send a clear message to the community that the staff care that the child was not there at school.

This individual focus was reiterated by the Chaplain who described the individual case management that emerged from the weekly meeting of the Student Services group. The group consisted of a Deputy Principal, the Guidance Officer, the Head of Special Education, the Chaplain, the Speech Pathologist and volunteer teachers. The group also drew on external services when required. According to the Chaplain:

> Well, some it is behavioural. Some of it is learning support. Some of it is, 'What steps do the parents need to take? What categories/avenues can the parents go down to get that support outside of school; get that support immediately? the school is a very busy place and the Guidance Officer is only here two days a week.

This interaction with external support groups was described as a multipronged approach by a member of a community agency:

> So if I can work with the family at the home but then come... bring them, talk to the Guidance Officer; and provide support in school. So then we will talk about, 'Let's get the Chappy (Chaplain) involved and maybe the Chappy can support them around anxiety. Let's get staff...involved. They can come and counsel them at school.' So it is a multi-pronged approach to supporting the whole family; and then that rolls down into the children being able to better focus at school.

There were no negative outcomes directed towards students who did not attend school other than missing school. The Principal made it clear that the school did not punish absenteeism. Instead, the focus was on the parents/carers and removing barriers in order to make it easier for them to bring or send their children to school. To facilitate this, the school, through the Chaplain, provided lunches and fruit and ran a breakfast club twice a week. Another initiative saw money raised from community sponsorship that was used to provide each new Prep student a uniform, stationery pack and all excursions paid for the year. These programs, along with an explicit message to parents/carers that they were not going to be judged by the teachers if their children were late or absent, was said to ensure positive interaction between the school and families.

This positive interaction was further facilitated by the restructuring of the school day. The school had two supervised eating/play breaks during the day and then the last section of the day was a 'play break'. The Principal commented:

> We trialled it for a term and our behaviour incidents dropped significantly. We then tried it for a year to see what our statistics looked like. At the end of the year we had reduced both our suspensions and detentions, so we adopted it permanently.

While having rewards around student wellbeing and achievement, the long 'play' sessions at the end of the day allowed further building of positive relationships between the staff, students and parents/carers.

The Principal recognised the multicultural nature of the school, including 16% Indigenous students and the 10% of students with a language background other than English. There

were programs in place that targeted specific groups i.e. the Solid Pathways program drew Indigenous students from the top two bands of NAPLAN into a targeted program that developed critical reasoning and understanding. Generally, however, he considered that the success of the different programs was about a whole school focus:

> Look honestly I can't (attribute the success to any one thing) - this school has a really, really strong team; and that team isn't just the teaching team. Everybody's in the job.

6.6.3 Classroom approaches

The school as a whole worked together to ensure that there was an engaging curriculum and that the school was considered to be a safe and supportive environment. There was a distinctive anti-bullying process in place that dealt with the issue at the time and then had an intensive mediation and follow up after the original incident. There was also a consistent message that every child was welcome in each class. A number of strategies had been developed over time to ensure student success in each classroom. Using resources made available through specific funding the administration team had developed teams of teachers known as 'flying squads'. These teachers, encompassing both literacy and numeracy, moved through the school visiting classrooms twice a week. At the time of the interviews the flying squads were focused on the Year 3 and Year 5 classroom in preparation for NAPLAN testing. Post NAPLAN they were to move to other year levels. These sessions provided intensive assistance to students in need. Often those who had been absent were targeted at this time.

Not only was there a focus on engaging students through the curriculum, but there were articulated attempts to make the classroom a rewarding place to be. Classes that were recognised as having a chronic record of absenteeism had instigated whole class strategies that included pizza parties, picnics and gardening sessions within and external to the school. There was evidence to suggest a persistent approach whereby teachers did not 'give up' on even the most serial non-attenders existed within the school. The teachers, support staff and administration staff worked together to find what worked for each student (and their parents/carers). While some teachers were in favour of extrinsic rewards for attendance and behaviour, others relied on building relationships with each student. For one senior teacher it was all about building rapport with the individual and their family.

161

6.6.4 Individual approaches

Part of the process of seeing each student as an individual began with a whole school program which required each teacher to identify a student (from a list of repeat absentees) whom they would like to mentor. The Deputy described the process:

> So it doesn't have to be from your year level. It's a child you might have a connection with. That child is formally told through a letter that you are their mentor and then it's our expectation that we build a relationship. If the child has a rocky day, we are a person they can come and bounce off. It gives them someone different in the school environment can actually talk to.

The program was not new and had been running for at least six years.

This whole school ethos of recognising each student (and their family) as an individual was reiterated several times during the school visit. Several examples of student issues were provided. One student found it difficult to walk into the classroom by herself, another student's grandparent had to be supported to ensure the student made it to school at the beginning of the day, and a third was a 'school refuser' who was being assessed for anxiety issues. In each case, there was a multi-layered approach that originated from the classroom, whilst drawing on different support processes from across the school, for example, the Chaplain, the Special Education Unit, external support, the administration team, and teachers from other classes. There was evidence of functional lines of communication which ensured that no student was overlooked.

6.6.5 Students

During the school visit, researchers had the opportunity to speak with two year groups, Year 2 and Year 6. The students were largely positive about their school experiences. There was not the opportunity to speak with students who were or had been non-attenders. The younger students interviewed focused in on the typically 'fun' activities to do at school. For example, pirate parties, art lessons, canteen visits and learning robotics. The Year 6 students, however, had a much more sophisticated understanding of what regular school attendance meant. They had engaged with a poster displayed around the school that articulated how many weeks of education were lost at different levels of absenteeism at school. One student described the message it sends:

I've actually seen a chart that is in the office. It says, 'Coming to school matters…'and it then says, 'If you miss a day every fortnight…then it's this much of school'. That is a lot of education lost.

There was also recognition that individual students were positively targeted to improve their school attendance record including rewards through iPad play and acknowledgement at school assemblies. Another Year 6 student commented on a particular student:

He's trying to come more but he's just - he really doesn't like school. I think he's going - like, today, he got the iPad from the library to help him with his learning because he understands the work; but he just can't write it down or read it. So he's got this iPad, as one of the things is a Spelling thing to help him.

They could also comment on the support structures in place. The role of the Chaplain was singled out by one Year 6 student:

Yeah if she's not busy, then you can just go and see her and she will just be 'Chappy'.

Another attraction of school for the senior students was the reward of leadership roles. The promise of these roles and the responsibility and recognition that came with them had a positive effect on students, some of whom were not always seen to be 'good' students. The students cited the example of one of the house captains, who had been 'naughty' the previous year, but had now 'picked up his behaviour' in order to be awarded the position.

6.6.6 Teachers

A number of teachers from across the year levels were interviewed during the school visit. In the early years, there was a clearly articulated policy that saw the teaching staff building relationships with the parents and children from the very beginning of school. The Prep classes held open mornings in Term 4 for the new cohort arriving in the new year. These sessions were all about 'building relationships' and ensuring that everyone was feeling comfortable in this new space. The teachers also spoke of professional development that developed age-appropriate pedagogies with the outcome of 'more engagement at the year level in order to encourage attendance'. There was a general recognition across the staff that while the situation was difficult and often very complex there were always ways forward. One teacher commented:

> I think the biggest thing is the admin team encourages you to look underneath. So it's not just saying 'This child needs to be here, get them to school'. They actually want you to say 'Why are they not at school?' There are always underlying causes. We can then say, 'What are we going to do to fix this problem?

This deeper recognition of the complexities of the context the teachers were working in was a key driver and ultimately the reason for the success the school was experiencing on a number of levels, including attendance. The teachers were empowered by their knowledge and understanding of their students and their individual situations. The outcome of this was a whole school celebration of their successes and a determination to keep working at it. The staff, as a whole, understood success from improving at a school systemic level not on a class by class basis. One teacher summarised this:

> It's not about pitting this class against this class... Who has the best attendance? It's about encouraging the kids to actually come as a whole. It's good. I don't think I would cope in a competitive environment. I would have a meltdown.

The teachers interviewed were open and honest about how difficult their work was in general, and particularly on some days. They admitted that the level of support provided by their peers, the Chaplain, and the administration team was largely responsible for their continued success with the students.

6.6.7 Parents and community

Parents and community members who met with the researchers identified several key approaches that were working at the school:

1. The strong relationships that the staff and administration team established with the students and their families;
2. The focus, not just on the academic outcomes of the student but on the student as a whole person; and
3. The organisational changes that the school had made to augment these strategies including the timetable restructure and the 'no homework' policy. Instead each child was asked to read (or be read to) for 15 minutes each day. There was also an expectation that each child would also take part in 15 minutes of physical activity with a family member each day.

164

The parents and community members were enthusiastic about the strategies and policies in place and the general outcomes overall. They recognised that the school, and particularly the Principal, was doing a good job in a challenging and complex environment.

6.6.8 Summary

The improvement and maintenance of attendance data at this school cannot be attributed to a single policy. There were a number of long term strategies and processes in place that have ensured improving outcomes in a complex environment. There was evidence of widespread capacity building of staff at every level. This was not just demonstrated in the professional learning opportunities, but also in the emotional support engendered in a collaborative work space. This support was extended across the whole school at every year level. The alignment of curriculum planning and implementation ensured that teachers have more space and time for different approaches at an individual level and to follow up on each student's needs.

The careful allocation of school resources for the purpose of improving attendance was also noted, not only in providing rewards but also for staff, including the Chaplain, Indigenous teacher aides to work with individual families to ask questions and offer varying levels of support if necessary. The school was also prepared to engage with external support services (as described by a community support member). These included: the Regional Domestic Violence service, the Early Years Centre and the Red Cross Family Support Centre. These and other community services provided varying levels of assistance to families in the area.

The school as a whole demonstrated a willingness to engage with attendance data as a method of developing understandings of where the problems might be. While there was little emphasis on percentage targets (these were unspoken), there was a consistent focus on attendance as being the key to improved outcomes at school. The Principal commented that while the region had an attendance goal of 94%, he had a school goal of 91%, which he thought was a more realistic target in the circumstances.

This school's success in improving student attendance was therefore founded on recognising the complexities of individual contexts, and as such, that absenteeism is a multi-layered and complex problem, with a short-term resolution unlikely. From this point, there were a number of elements that contributed to improving student attendance, such as the

leadership displayed by the administration team, particularly the Principal. This leadership focused on the continuity of tenure for both administration and teaching staff, allocation of both fiscal and human resources, and targeted whole school and individual approaches. The leadership team also worked to ensure consistency in approach, building positive relationships, ensuring alignment of curriculum planning and implementation, and providing intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards for attendance.

6.6.9 What have we learnt from this school?

There are lessons to be learned from this school. The highly intensive processes connected with school attendance that the school engaged with frequently targeted students and parents at an individual level. It was this preparedness to connect with the complexities of the context and the recognition there was not a single solution to the multilayered problems that set the school apart. The interaction and the social relations developed on all levels within and external to the school were largely responsible for the success of the different attendance strategies. The Deputy Principal provides the final word: 'We have worked very hard to get here … and we are always here for the kids.'

6.7 Case Study 7

Case Study 7 is a combined co-educational school catering for Years P-12 and is located in Brisbane. The school has an enrolment of approximately 800 students; with approximately 8% of students identifying as Indigenous, and 13% having English as a second language. The school's ICSEA value is in the mid-900s, below the national average of 1000, with approximately 75% of students situated in the bottom and bottom middle quartiles. In Term 3 of 2016, the attendance rate was 90%, with 62% of all students attending school 90% or more of the time.

6.7.1 Background/ overall philosophy relating to attendance

The school sought to achieve a 'balanced approach' to addressing matters of attendance. According to the Principal:

> I feel our staff team really knows our school community well. There are people who have been here for a long period of time; and then you have people with fresh ideas who have come in. So we have a balance of ideas. We use that balance to know our school community well and influence the things we put in place. We aim to implement strategies our parents and students are going to be supportive of.

The teachers reported that 'there's a lot of consultation at this school… it's absolutely democratic, honest; people are safe to be able to voice an opinion. It isn't just one voice rules. You have got a system; and there are many heads solving this.' (Special Education teacher)

Relationships with families were emphasised: 'It's all about relationships. And the relationship you build up with your families … There may be rhetoric there but then when you scratch beneath the surface, there can be a different take on things. And that's certainly not the case here. It is very positively encouraged.' (Special Education teacher)

This was supported by the Prep teacher, who noted that improving attendance was linked to building relationships with the families: 'We really invite our families/community into our school and say, 'Come and have a look. Come and sit with us. Come and help. Come and be part of our school community.'

Within this overall approach, the Principal emphasised the importance of positive strategies: 'It's really important that they are positive, proactive strategies; rather than the reactive ones. I have never found them to work.'

The school's student-centred approach was noted by the Special Education teacher: 'It is child/student focussed rather than the data, the rules, the admin.'

6.7.2 Barriers to attendance

The school staff reported multiple barriers to ensuring that the school had high attendance data. These included:

- Parental attitude
- Parent mental health
- Financial hardship
- Caring for younger siblings
- Bullying
- Lack of identification of needs
- Low academic achievement

6.7.3 Monitoring data

The school was noted by the teachers as having a structured, systematic approach to monitoring data: 'There is a structure and a systematic management and kind of documenting of each child; and then it goes - so it is a very streamlined/thorough way of documenting/dealing with students that are flagged as needing support.' (Special Education teacher)

The senior students described the data that were shared with them:

> We have year assemblies on Thursdays. So we all - get read out who is in the red; so who is not at all meeting 92%; like, far off it. And then there is the yellow and green people, who are on point; like, they always say, 'Tell your friends that aren't here', because most of the time the red people aren't there; 'and get them to come because it's impacting everyone else and the school in general'.

6.7.4 Rewards/ Punishments

The use of rewards to encourage attendance was described by some teachers. For example, '…we have a marble jar; if everybody's here on time, a marble goes into the jar. And then we negotiate what the marble jar reward is' (Year 2 teacher). A Year 4 teacher similarly commented that the classes that achieved 100% attendance got ice-blocks in the hot weather.

However, rewards were not the key focus, and the teachers recognised that 'there is a bit of controversy about praise and reward systems and how that affects children, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation and how we tap into that' (Prep teacher).

One Year 7 student saw a benefit of rewards: 'What I see it as … it's motivation of what is in the real world. If you work hard, you get a reward. Because, like, if you don't do good at your job or whatever you do, you won't get paid. But if you do do good, you might get promoted or get a bigger money sum.'

6.7.5 Addressing conditions preventing attendance

The school had several strategies to help families experiencing financial hardship. In addition to the breakfast club, the teachers helped out with stationery and books: 'I went and bought exercise books for $4 and I just keep them on my desk; because I know that I have a couple of students who don't bring books/pens to class but it is because they haven't stayed at home the night before; they have stayed with friends or - because that's just the best-case scenario for them' (English/PE teacher). The school also had a payment plan for books and uniforms.

6.7.6 Creating positive school environment

Many of the students were very positive about the school environment. One senior student stated that this was: 'Because we are probably the smallest school in the area. We have that more, as cheesy as it sounds, more family sort of environment… I love, like, knowing the younger grades; like, knowing most of the teachers; I like that.' (Senior student)

The senior students also described their school as 'an equal playing field … where the relationship between teacher/student is more equal.' Student/teacher engagement was illustrated in the following scenario, described by the Special Education teacher:

I spent 15 minutes of time with this young man on a basketball court and we were able to shoot goals; during which time I found out that he was failing his English, he was failing Maths, but he had a high self-esteem. He was learning how to be a referee outside of school. All of this wealth of information, just by being able to have this as part of the time; and it wasn't in an office, chatting.

The Year 6 teacher discussed the open-door policy 'where the kids can come in and do their homework early and things like that, has really helped us get the kids to school on time and doing something in the mornings before the bell actually rings.'

6.7.7 Addressing needs of specific groups

Part of the Special Education teacher's role was 'to network with Indigenous organisations within the community; to give that family the support that they needed.'

High-achieving Year 7 students appreciated the scholars' program: 'we are in a class where it's all the high-achieving students and we are all sort of on the same level; and it's no talking; there's no distractions; so that's why I like coming to school … The challenge is really good because you are learning more.' (Year 7 students)

These students also noted the help given to students: 'We have a homework club after school … you can just go to them and get help … I think we have it on Monday afternoons and about 30 people go.'

6.7.8 Engaging curricula and pedagogies

Disengagement from learning was discussed by one of the senior students: 'they are at school, but are they present? … School is really important, like to be there every day, but it only counts when you are actually learning stuff at school.' He specifically commented on the distraction of technology, describing the way students tended to engage more with their phones than their teachers and fellow students.

The importance of pedagogy emerged strongly in the interview with the Prep teacher and the project approach she used to engage the children and their parents in the learning process. She provided more detail: 'We are going away from that pushdown curriculum back to the play-based and really engaging children in their interests/learning; and trying to match that up to the learning objectives of the curriculum as opposed to going, 'Well, this is

what the curriculum wants us to do, so this is how we have to do it.' She noted other teachers also engage the students in learning by trying to make it fun/exciting and engaging as they can. In order to achieve these goals, she discussed the importance of continuous professional development, research and varying teaching approaches.

The focus on pedagogy was reflected in the statement, 'I think they really need to take a step back on the importance of testing and things like that. As if students are going to want to rock up to that' (English/PE teacher).

The importance of building upon student interests and making learning meaningful was noted by one senior student: 'There should be real world stuff. Not learning 'what pi is equal to and X' … You are going to use that maybe if you are an engineer and maybe something like a researcher … But you are not going to use that if you are working in trades or like an arbourist or something like that.'

6.7.9 Student views

One senior student articulated the need for a balance in approaches to attendance: 'I got a medical certificate saying I don't have to be here today … But mentally, my mind is like 'I need to go to school. I need to go to school' … it is probably not the best thing me being here … I had all four wisdom teeth taken out. It is just about the mentality of the situation: everyone wants to come to school, but you have to sort of work out an equal balance.'

He reflected further: 'if we could find a healthy balance and have a happy medium, as to how to approach it, definitely all three [monitoring data, removing barriers and making students want to come to school] are important to give you where you are, where you are up to, but, also, what is around in the school to get you to where you need to be.'

Another senior student emphasised that:

> In Years, 7, 8, 9, it is a like a progression of learning. But then in Year 10, you just repeat Year 9 and you get, like, relaxed; and it's dangerous; because then in Year 11, it is such a big change … For the past four years, that I have been here, Year 11 has always been the year that the grades have dropped, the attendance has dropped …The Department of Education, they want to get the transition from 6 to 7, primary

school to high school, which is really great; but getting that transition from Year 10 to senior needs to be there as well; you have to prepare the students for it.'

6.7.10 Teacher views

The teacher interviews demonstrated a focus on building relationships, and curriculum and pedagogy, more than the rewards *per se*. The communication between teachers and students on all levels was found to be very good.

6.7.11 Parent views

A grandparent noted how supportive the school had been for her grandson, whose mother had died: 'I can't thank the school enough for what they have done for him.' Another parent appreciated the monitoring and sharing of data: 'They are tracking it very quickly; and you get a warning really early; so you know if your kid hasn't gone to school. You know if they are missing class.'

6.7.12 Summary

This school's success in achieving improved attendance can be attributed to a suite of strategies, which began with clear processes and looking at patterns rather than simply numbers in the data. From this standpoint, the school utilised a range of forums to develop strong relationships with students through employing 'culturally appropriate' staff who have a thorough knowledge of the cultural protocols of the different cultures within the school. This building of relationships extended from families to include the local primary feeder schools and external agencies. In order to utilise these external agencies most effectively, the school has used discretionary funding to facilitate an individual case management approach. The school also articulated a vision based upon having high expectations of all students.

6.7.13 What have we learnt from this school?

This case study demonstrated the importance of a focus on a balanced and comprehensive approach to improving attendance, rather than an overt focus on rewards systems. This approach incorporated a supportive and positive school environment, proactive strategies, developing cultural capability, a structured and systematic approach to data which was shared with parents and students, and attention to curriculum and pedagogies to improve engagement and attendance.

6.8 Case study 8

Case Study 8 is a secondary school in Brisbane. The school has approximately 720 students with 13% identifying as Indigenous and 58% as having English as a second language. The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) was approximately 900. MySchool data indicated that 61% of students were in the bottom quarter of Community Social-Educational Advantage. In Term 3 of 2016, student attendance for all students was 88%, of which 68% attended more than 90% of the time.

The Principal remarked that strategies put in place over the past four or five years had led to the disappearance of attendance from the list of school priorities, but went on to say: 'I don't mean it is not a priority. It just means that we seem to have got to a point where our processes are established.'

6.8.1 Barriers to attendance and school's measures in recent years

The school is culturally diverse, enrolling Indigenous, Pasifika, Vietnamese, Sudanese and African students. Many cases of absenteeism were said to be related to cultural reasons (e.g. festivals, births, marriages, deaths) with students going overseas for days and sometimes weeks. A member of staff also noted that students who have English as a second language found this a barrier as it made the curriculum less accessible to them.

If a student was absent without notice, parents received a text message followed by a phone call and regular follow ups. Managing absenteeism was a visible process on a flow-chart with each staff member having a part to play and a clear description of their role. The following were identified by staff as reasons for chronic absenteeism:

- Disengagement
- Cultural reasons
- Family values of education/understanding of importance of education
- Parenting skills
- Domestic violence
- Unstable home life
- Caring for younger siblings

- Parent apathy

- Financial hardship

- Transport

- Intergeneration unemployment

- Transient families.

6.8.2 Whole school strategies

The Principal noted that a number of strategies implemented in recent years have contributed to their improved statistics. The first of these was to have an attendance policy under which every individual has a part to play: student, teacher, and parent.

6.8.3 Tracking students

Students were identified as 'at risk' when attendance was around 85%, then an intervention was introduced. Every fortnight, the year level support team met and identified students who needed tracking for attendance, academic progress and behaviour.

Intervention involved contact with families, through phone calls and daily checks. Accepting that DET considers 85% to be the danger zone, the Principal said they regarded 'chronic' as fewer than 50% and that these were students who had regular days off rather than a block. The staff looked for patterns rather than just numbers.

The school used a number of forums to talk about absence with parents, including emails, newsletters, postcards and face-to-face conversations.

6.8.4 Rewards/ Punishments

Weekly data were visible and explicit. Rewards were used in the school in the shape of a lucky-dip monetary award for 100% attendance – drawn each fortnight. One teacher noticed how students talked about rewards and their excitement about their potential to win. He noted they also enjoyed tracking their own attendance on the class chart and working out their percentage with pride. This teacher explained that one reason for its success was that the students were taking 'ownership' and bore some responsibility. The students also pointed out that this strategy was motivating, 'I know that's being kept a record of and people are going to see that stuff.'

While cancellation of enrolment was considered to be a 'powerful tool' in addressing absenteeism, the staff reported that detentions and suspensions were not given for absences, 'We don't suspend them … because it kind of defeats the purpose … neither do we give detention, for the same reason' (Principal). However, one of the teachers reported that suspensions were given for overt truancy. There were also denials of school activities for low attendance. The Year 8 Coordinator stated that the school makes it clear, for example, that 'if [students'] attendance is not up to par; they don't get to go to camp'.

6.8.5 Return to school

On a student's return to school after a long absence there was support to ease them into school life. For example, workload was negotiated to ensure students were comfortable with the demands of catch-up. One teacher, commenting on the return of students with no materials, stressed that placing increased pressure on students was counter-productive when they were already facing difficult issues at home. The school minimised the problem of missed work by adjusting their goals (junior level) or changing pathways (senior level). One teacher noted that it was important not to overwhelm a student when they returned. He explained that such students were often feeling fragile, so he paired them with another student, saying things to put the student at ease, like, 'Hey, it is easy, man. You will get this in half an hour.'

6.8.6 Relationships

The teachers stressed the importance of good relationships with students as being integral to ensuring student success. A science teacher, for example, stated: 'I ask them about their weekends. Everything. You find something they are interested in... I talk to them – I don't talk down to them… so they love coming to Science.'

The students explained that their relationships with their teachers extended beyond school hours. One indicated that: 'If you don't have computer access at home, you can stay on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. A lot of teachers come and just hang out in the library and they are just free; like, any students need help with homework/assessment and stuff.'

The school had also developed strong relationships with their three primary feeder schools: 'So the kids that are going to come to this school, they are constantly here; their parents

come with them … we start building relationships with them before they even get here' (Pasifika Liaison Officer).

A range of external agencies were also utilised to assist the students and their families experiencing difficulties. These included: Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS), Kids in Mind, Headspace, The Smith Family, and the local Youth Support Centre.

6.8.7 Curriculum and pedagogy

A current priority of the school was engagement. One teacher noted the staff room had become enormously collaborative, a place where they regularly shared ideas and strategies: 'It is one of my favourite things about the school…a lot of our work surrounding engagement has been centred on moving away from 'teacher talk.' The students agreed that their lessons were, on the whole, fun and related to life beyond the classroom and they were quick to give examples from their own lessons where teachers used everyday scenarios to make their learning relevant. The students felt that their teachers were enthusiastic about what they taught, had high expectations and 'they also set goals for us and they come back alongside us, to push us together.' The staff also allowed students to present oral work during lunch breaks if were having a bad day or were not confident: 'they want you to be comfortable in the learning environment.'

6.8.8 Support system and community relationships

The Principal considered the relationships and liaison work with families was the most successful strategy utilised by the school to improve attendance.

Another factor influencing improved attendance was put down to the strong support system put in place by the school to case manage certain students. The Director of Student Achievement noted, 'Probably the single most important thing in our improvement has been the availability of resources.'

With the aid of discretionary funding, the school had been able to build a support system to facilitate case management. A School-based Police Officer and Indigenous Community Education Counsellor (CEC) visit the homes of chronic absentees to ascertain the reasons for the continued absences and to offer support. The school had employed a number of 'culturally appropriate' staff who also visited the homes of Vietnamese, Somali and Pasifika students. Working with parents was identified as an important factor in ensuring some

students made it to school '…some parents need a bit of support…to get their children into routines and that sort of thing.' Initial phone calls were described as simply to verify the absence and stress the ways in which the school could support them. The Pasifika Liaison Officer said that students had no trouble opening up about home problems, which enabled him to refer to student services if necessary.

One teacher emphasised the importance of school culture: 'So we have got often three generations of kids from the same family. We know the parents; we know the kids really well.' Another commented that she couldn't phone home for a large number of students because of the language barrier - this is where liaison staff played a critical role, commenting that the Pasifika Liaison Officer had an excellent knowledge of the community which made groups feel they were part of a bigger family – the school.

The Pasifika Liaison Officer echoed these thoughts, '…so there's always like a cultural process that you go through when approaching the families... I think just having obviously that background knowledge of protocol really does help to eliminate any hostile experiences that you may face.' With regards to Pasifika students (around 45% of the school), he placed importance on a strong connection with the local church and suggested the pastors and reverends had power to educate parents and students of the importance of going to school. He consequently worked with the church to raise certain issues which Pastors were then 'able to bring that up at their church meetings or even Sunday sermons, they are able to discuss that with the parents.' He also had a regular weekly spot on local radio where he talked about education and encouraged students to attend school and communicate with their teachers.

When attempting to track down Indigenous students who had been absent for extended periods, the CEC explained: 'It is a very cultural approach … It's kind of what we call 'the Murri grapevine', where we just call amongst the Aboriginal staff in the office and try and make connections.' (CEC)

The Year 8 Coordinator described a high turn-out for both parent and cultural evenings: 'It's a bit of a bottle-neck at the door, trying to get in'. This was attributed to the strong relationships that the school has developed with the community.

6.8.9 Sports Development Program (SDP)

One strategy mentioned by students was a Sports Development Program (SDP) for regular attenders in Years 10, 11 and 12. Rather than going to form class they had extra HPE lessons: '…we see the trend of those SDP classes in 10, 11 and 12 nearly always above that 92%' and add they are more often than not the class with the highest attendance percentage' (English/HPE teacher).

The students discussed having both choice and voice in the curriculum: 'I guess something that this school has done well is tailoring subjects…I know that some of the subjects we do here, I have got friends (from other schools) that have said they really would love it, to see that at their school.'

6.8.10 Summary

Throughout the interviews, there was a repeated emphasis on rigorous tracking in which every member of the community played a part and was aware of their role; thus ensuring high expectations and avoiding inadvertently missing any students who needed help. The school's emphasis on engaging students in their learning proved popular for students and staff alike; the underscoring of relationship building and community feel was at the heart of this school's success.

The teachers agreed that the work of the support services was vital, 'It's all about relationship building; that is a big thing.' As one remarked, 'some of these students are facing genuinely awful things at home… things that I don't think I could probably cope with as an adult.'

For students, a sense of family and a safe, fun place to learn were the overriding sentiments expressed: '…our school has a strong foundation, community spirit…we have so many help services.' Students knew who to go to and believe they are listened to, 'I know, that if I go and speak to them (teachers), bring up an issue, something will happen with that; and it will be brought up.'

6.8.11 What have we learned from this school?

This school's emphasis on a whole school approach to tracking attendance data ensured that the staff had high expectations of all students. However, the dominant theme arising from this school was expressed by both the Principal, 'I think the relationships part and the

liaison work with families is the most successful and a little bit of carrot as well' and the Pasifika Liaison Officer, 'It is not even cultural. It is the human race/human beings. We all need to belong somewhere and wherever that place we belong needs to be safe'.

6.9 Case Study 9

Case Study 9 is located in South West Queensland. It is co-educational Prep to Year 12 school operating from three campuses. The school has approximately 900 students with 16% identifying as Indigenous and 4% with English as a second language. The ICSEA data from the school indicate that 40% of students lie in the bottom quarter of Community Social-Educational Advantage. In Term 3 of 2016, student attendance for all students was 87% of which 60% attended more than 90% of the time.

6.9.1 Reasons for absence

Those interviewed for the study provided a range of reasons for some students' low attendance at school. These included:

- Fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) mentality
- Cultural reasons
- Parent apathy
- Rural considerations (e.g. drought)

6.9.2 Strategies

The Principal was clear that he felt the school had stagnated in terms of its approach to teaching and learning and needed change. He was therefore determined to make improvements. Emphasis was placed on attendance being owned by all, not just the Attendance Officer, '…each and every one of us own the attendance of every kid.' New roles were created and some were fine-tuned with a focus on creating roles which would provide a high-level of support for those who were struggling.

Individual rewards were introduced for junior students and class rewards for older students. Programs were introduced specifically for Indigenous students to encourage engagement and attendance. Support systems such as local Elders and community engagement counsellors (CEC) were used for chronic cases. The number of activities around the school had grown to engage students in social activities and making school fun.

6.9.3 Tracking students

One of the first initiatives put in place was to have a targeted approach to the whole analysis of absentee data. The Principal surveyed parents with questions about attendance then, 'we really sat down with our college teams and our leadership teams and our teaching teams and

our parents…the aspirational target stood around the 80% mark and was then set at 90% then 92% and so on. Students are now tracked in a five-week block and if a student is sitting on 21/22 out of 25 'alarm bells are going off'. Similarly, they were alerted if a student was absent for three or more days in a row. A phone call or email was used to make sure everything was all right. Each Friday a letter was sent home to the families of students who had missed two or more days that week.

Each day the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) teacher checked in with those under 75% attendance and she, or the CEC phoned home. She also went to the classrooms of students whose attendance was between 76% and 80% to check they were in, and opted for positive conversations and offer support. The CEC made most of the home visits for all students, which, according to the PBL teacher, 'help to build relationships.' A Year 1 teacher noted that these support staff had made a big difference, 'Like, she's chasing children who aren't coming to school… those phone calls home, those letters; which has taken away from us…that's been great. '

There were posters around the school recording how many days a week absence transfers to a whole year/and so on; the information was also printed in their diaries.

The Principal was clear that all improvements had to 'start with the data; you have to know what you are dealing with, so tracking is absolutely essential.' From this, the staff could check for attendance patterns, which could then be used to inform future arrangements of major school events in order to minimise absenteeism and serious considerations could also be dealt with.

6.9.4 Building strong relationships

The importance of building relationships was articulated by the Head of Student Welfare, who described relationships as a priority. She described walking around the junior school each morning and stopping to talk with parents in the local supermarket. The VET coordinator spent time with targeted students doing activities such as preparing for an interview: 'The numbers are small…we are able to provide and care for them.' The Dean of Senior Students pointed out that, 'we have got some of the best student support staff … These relationships can be invaluable giving them a sense of belonging in a safe environment.'

The Dean of Junior Students believed in going straight to parents when a student is absent, often finding that parents were lonely or not enforcing attendance for their benefit; with the students often wanting to be at school. She discussed working with outside agencies to support the parents.

The school's CEC noted that 'being known in the community can often have a beneficial effect. If a member of the community sees a student down the street, they will call me, '[Name], did you know that such and such is down the street?''

One Prep teacher discussed the strong links that she had established with parents and how she often took photographs of the children's work, and sending these to parents.

6.9.5 Teacher student relationships

Senior students commented on how helpful staff were when struggling families could not provide equipment, clothes or in some cases, food for their children: 'they find spare clothes, they have spare boxes of equipment'. The senior students felt their voices were heard, one saying the teachers told them: 'no question is a silly question.' One also indicated that the teachers were 'trying to boost your confidence, too.' Others said, 'they [the teachers] are honest'; 'they are not too harsh' … 'they want us to do well.'

A number of staff also described going along to weekend sports fixtures and having side-line conversations with parents, again building positive relationships.

6.9.6 Return to school

On returning to school, the Principal explained that with those who had been absent for some time 'we try and do a little of what we call planning … about getting credits up and having a purpose.' The support of the Youth Support Coordinator or Guidance Counsellor as well as using vocational education and training (VET) and organising work experience were all used to encourage re-engagement. The senior students were quick to point out that on returning to school after an absence the school was very understanding: 'they give you space; they don't rush you … they will help you, they will sit down with you.'

6.9.7 Engaging students

In the secondary school, the Head of VET had implemented engaging programs to encourage students. One of these was known as 'Try Trades', in which students try a different trade for a

day each week: 'Because those students have a pathway that they are really happy with and they are out of school for at least one day a week, then they are much more likely to attend … And the community/industry here has been great because they know that these kids are their future employees.'

The PBL teacher took 15 minutes at the beginning of each staff meeting as well as extended sessions, to talk about engagement and promoting good practice seen around the school. All teachers stressed the importance of doing hands-on activities, relating learning to the real world and making learning fun as a strategy to keep students engaged in their learning and therefore, wanting to go to school … 'so they know that there is a purpose, pretty much, in everything that they are doing.'

Several teachers also mentioned adjusting assignments to cater for individual needs and interests. Also mentioned was high attendance for Health and Physical Education (HPE) being used to cater for missed lessons elsewhere, 'to incorporate some of those things that they have possibly missed (from other lessons) and put into that HPE context.' One teacher also mentioned that he sometimes adjusted Friday's lessons (which can be low attendance) to work that is easy to catch up with (e.g. online).

Some strategies around finishing lessons in ways that reinforced learning had also been employed: 'Finishing the lessons with a review and wrapping up,' as well as telling them what they will be doing the next day/lesson/later, the Principal suggested, encourages a 'degree of excitement.'

6.9.8 Rewards/Incentives

The school had a number of rewards/incentives to help boost attendance. The Principal added that rewards were not the long-term answer to solving this problem: '…it's got to be intrinsic to make behavioural change.'

In the junior school, the Head of Student Welfare had a number of rewards for 100% attendance, ranging from her home-made cupcakes to an attendance party at the end of term. Classes were also rewarded with a popcorn party and a trophy was awarded each week to the class with the highest attendance. Students who achieved 95% or more received a postcard in the holidays as well as during the term.

The school had a Facebook page where twice a day achievements were posted and attendance rewards were noted. The Dean of Students commented that there were a 'number of parents that are really into this; that are 'liking', sharing it, commenting on it.'

The school gave out what they called 'gotchas' as rewards for attendance which could be traded in at the tuckshop, and the school also had gold, silver and bronze awards each term. In addition, individual teachers often had their own rewards, such as 'Friday milkshakes'.

Without fail all interviewees considered that punitive measures did not work.

The senior school ran a 'Beyond the Broncos' program for Indigenous students, which required both good behaviour as well as good attendance. Students who achieved these were able to attend the session on leadership and team-building. This took place twice a term and the students were unaware of which day the program's team were coming. This appeared to encourage attendance for Indigenous students.

6.9.9 Other observations

Parental accountability was seen by most staff as a problem: 'parents need to make them (students) [come]. It is too easy not to fight with them and just let them stay in bed.'

Senior students added that the pressure of so many assessments meant sometimes students did not want to come to school, as it made them feel rushed, which was often experienced as stressful.

The head of VET noted that the facilities available at the school impacted on subject offerings. Additional facilities, such as for Industrial Arts, Industrial Design, and Hospitality would allow for increased subject choice for students and potentially improved engagement.

6.9.10 Summary

In this school there was a strong message that a combination of careful tracking, good support services, engaging lessons and improved opportunities had turned this school around.

A common concern of teachers was the value in educating parents about the relevance of coming to school; the staff noted there were a number of students saying, 'Mum said I could stay at home.' The staff placed high value on the support staff and their building of strong relationships. One teacher stated: 'I think if the community trusts your school, you have got a

battle won.' A Year 4 teacher added, 'They are all working extremely well to encourage the more reluctant attenders to come.'

For the students, the emphasis was on relationships with staff, interesting lessons and having choices in the curriculum. It was notable that a senior student's last comment in the interviews was 'School's fun', which was echoed by the group. Both junior and senior students commented on how most teachers made their lessons varied, fun and interesting.

6.9.11 What have we learned from this school?

The use of incentives/rewards was seen as only one approach within a suite of strategies which would lead to students experiencing school as enjoyable and a safe place to learn. These included careful tracking of attendance data, developing strong relationships with the community, engaging with external agencies, and enhancing student engagement through engaging curricula and pedagogies.

6.10 Case Study 10

Case Study 10 is a co-educational secondary school catering for Years 7-12 and is located in Far North Queensland. The school has an enrolment of approximately 1,700 students, with approximately 30% of students identifying as Indigenous, and 45% having English as a second language. The school's ICSEA value is a little over 900, below the national average of 1000, with close to 75% of students situated in the bottom and bottom middle quartiles. In Term 3 of 2016, the attendance rate was 87%, with 57% of all students attending school 90% or more of the time.

6.10.1 Background/overall philosophy relating to absenteeism

The school's philosophy was based on the idea that 'we don't have 'chool rules; we have expectations because rules are made to be broken; expectations are made to be met.' The success of the school's approach was reflected in the School-based Police Officer's observation that, 'everyone is a bit shocked that our school - which has a difficult demographic - is doing so well … They are judging on a stereotype that you wouldn't get that kind of compliance in a school like this.'

The Attendance Officer indicated that this success was largely the result of teamwork: 'We are very much a big team and we all play a very important part. We all use school resources; we pick each other's brains if we are not sure about something.' This was supported by the Head of Department (HOD) Student Engagement, who emphasised, 'Everyone needs to be part of the team, otherwise it all falls apart.'

6.10.2 Reasons for absenteeism

Those interviewed provided the following reasons for poor attendance at school:

- Cultural reasons/ distance
- Students living away from parents
- Financial hardship
- Lack of public transport
- Parent mental health
- Physical health
- Caring for younger siblings

- Transition to secondary school

- Alcohol and/or substance abuse

- Domestic violence

- No alternative programs for junior students

- Low academic achievement

- School seen as pointless

- Students in the justice system

6.10.3 Changes in data

The Principal described significant changes in attendance data between 2012 and 2016: 'In 2012 … 33.7% of our student population was below 85% … now it's only 19.1%. And many of those are between the 80 and 85% mark … So we are finally on the green for attendance headline indicators, which is really exciting.'

6.10.4 Strategies

The importance of early intervention utilising the strategies discussed below, was emphasised by the Attendance Officer:

> The more they miss, the more behind they get; the more shame; 'I don't want to be here. I don't know the work. I don't know what we are doing.' So we have to catch them quick, before that cycle gets too overwhelming … And then learning difficulties on top of that … 'No, forget it. I'm not going to school.' So I totally get where they are coming from.

6.10.5 Whole School approaches

The Principal explained that the staff had established a process in order to encourage attendance which was consistently implemented across the school: 'They have to have at least 85% attendance, the school fees paid or on a payment plan, assessment complete and clearance of good behaviour, and no overdue library books … if they want to go on a camp or excursion or Year 12 graduation … that are not part of their assessment, they have to have clearance.'

The HOD Senior Pathways explained the significance of this clearance process for those students who chose to undertake TAFE courses or school-based apprenticeships: 'They can … drop a subject at school; start working towards a career … they have to meet [clearance],

though … If they haven't got those things down pat, we feel like we are setting them up to fail.'

While the school was strict in enforcing the clearance process, staff were quick to emphasise that 'if students can't get clearance, we will have a talk about how they can get clearance … we give them a chance to improve (Attendance Officer, HOD Senior Pathways), and that 'if they have brought in medical certificates … or they were late getting back because of flights … we make some allowances.' (Principal)

The senior students reported that the clearance process was one of the strengths of their school: 'Setting up a high standard, I guess … 'This is what we are going to expect', and see where the school is at, and the improvement. You know, tell the students when they are improving.'

6.10.6 Ownership

Several staff discussed the importance of ownership: 'You take ownership of the place that you are in … 'Let's try and improve it' … 'Let's prove them wrong,' or, 'Let's work with this' - it is a challenge.' (School-based Police Officer)

Student ownership of their school was also reported by parents as a strength, particularly in relation to any bad publicity. Parents discussed an incident in which a community member's property was damaged by a student so other students offered to do fundraising to help build positive relationships.

6.10.7 Engagement with community

The Deputy Principal explained that in order to effectively engage with the community, 'we are working with Dr George Otero … a leader in 'Relational Learning' … we talk to him about building our partnerships with community and how we can engage community.'

Part of this engagement with the local community related to inclusion. For example, 'A lot of our staff at the moment are working towards Harmony Day … looking at having the different cultural groups represented; they are getting the seniors to mentor the juniors … students from different cultural groups doing dances and arts and crafts; and they do some cooking … those sort of things increase the engagement with the students but, also, with

the parents; and tapping into the skill-sets that parents have to bring them into the school.' (Deputy Principal)

The success of engaging with the community was reflected in increases in parent involvement. A Deputy Principal stated: 'We had our P & C meeting last week … the largest … in the last two years. There were 12 new faces which was amazing; because normally there's only about six/seven parents there. So that was really exciting.'

The school worked with various organisations to address attendance. The HOD Senior Pathways stated: 'if we don't have a program here that would address [disengaged students'] needs … then I can either determine whether they really do want to stay at school and stick it out or if they think a different environment would be better … offer them certificate courses; so they are continuing their learning elsewhere … not bogged down by our rules … more of an adult learning environment'. She went on to explain that 'some students seem to benefit from having a break from the school environment … I sent some students … to do certificate courses … some have come back to re-enrol this year to start their senior; fresh, ready, raring to go.'

The HOD Senior Pathways also outlined how they have contracted [an organisation] to place Year 10 students into a workplace within the local community: 'We want them to have some idea of where they are heading or sometimes it is to rule out; which I think is as important as ruling it in … They trial it for a week; they get an evaluation form …. They can use that for a resume, for part-time jobs and things like that; it shows their attendance, punctuality, reliability and things like that.' She went on to describe how in some cases, 'the student will come back and it will be the first real positive feedback they have had about what they do,' and that gaining a school-based apprenticeship/traineeship was a significant event: 'Some employers come back to us and go, 'He was fantastic. I would like to offer him a school-based traineeship … The sign-ups; we make sure everybody is here … the employer, the Registered Training Organisation, the school, parents, the student … it becomes quite a thing that students can … feel really good about.'

The school also worked with a small Catholic college nearby to provide an alternate pathway. The HOD Student Engagement explained: 'some students have found that this big school environment is not working. So [they have] taken a number of our students … they

have a kind of alternate learning … very small groups … flexible timetable … a lot of them boomerang back.'

The CEC reported that the school also worked with local primary schools and other external agencies to support students: 'The attendance officers from the primary schools always let us know the ones that are struggling … there are some agencies out there that help with the extreme cases … for example, the Salvation Army.'

The School-based Police Officer described having a background in child protection and domestic violence, which helped her to develop an understanding of 'the cycle of everything that comes with low socio-economic status, from a policing point of view.' She also emphasised the need for cultural sensitivity during home visits to Indigenous families.

6.10.8 Monitoring data

The Principal explained that 'In 2012 the focus was students with really low attendance … it didn't make a lot of difference … so in 2013 we … targeted students … between 65 and 85%; to look at the reasons, the barriers and to move that attendance up.' As a result, the CEC explained that the Attendance Officer monitored those students in the 'middle ground', while the more extreme cases were referred to the SWAT's (Student Well-being and Attendance Team).

Attendance data were closely monitored to keep track of students. The Attendance Officer explained: 'I monitor attendance every day, five days a week. I keep a spread sheet of the students that I am watching.' She also indicated that she intended to compile a spread sheet of students who had been suspended: 'why those students were suspended … I would like to see these students come back from suspension and go into a different classroom, to address the problems, the reason for suspension, before putting them back into the classroom situation.'

The students were also kept informed of their own attendance data. The Year 12 Coordinator stated that: 'It is the topic of conversation; it is on assembly every single week. So they are seeing the data. However she also emphasised that, 'if you keep pushing too hard, you end up … switching kids off. And if you make the target too unachievable … it has the opposite effect … 'I won't even try.'

6.10.9 Rewards/punishments

The school's attendance rewards program was described by the Attendance Officer:

> I give them a Freddo frog or lollypop when they reach 85% … pool parties, pizza parties … a trophy goes to the class with the most improved attendance each week; rather than just the class that has the highest attendance. So that promotes the competition just to get better; not necessarily to be the best.' This was supported by the Year 12 Coordinator, who noted, 'if you only reward … top attendance, it's going to keep being those same groups.

The junior students also reported that: 'We get lollies and things, at the end of each term … and all students, who get really good attendances, they get invited to the end of year activities … like [water park], snazzy things.'   However, the Year 12 Coordinator commented that 'By Year 9, a lot of that stuff had worn off, I guess.'

The Deputy Principal stressed the importance of language use: 'the phrase 'you are missing out' is the one we use. It is not, 'You have done the wrong thing.' … It is probably just the choice of language.'

The Attendance Officer indicated that overt truancy had consequences for students through a three strikes approach. She explained: 'So first time truanting is a warning and a call home … second time … lunch time detention of 20 minutes. Third time … with permission from the parents; a 3 p.m. after-school detention with me; usually Friday afternoons, when they really want to get out of school grounds.' She noted the success of the approach, saying 'I would be lucky to have one a fortnight now' and that although students who fail to do their 3 p.m. detention can be suspended for gross disobedience, 'it very rarely gets to that stage.'

6.10.10 Addressing conditions that prevent attendance

The Deputy Principal stressed that 'we try to be consistent but that's where the different people in the support team look at what the barriers are and look at what there needs to be made available. So that's where our Chaplain and youth support coordinators decided, 'Well, we needed food.' As a result, in this instance, the school established a breakfast club, and the support team ensured that students were able to access food at lunch time.

One of the junior students was particularly appreciative of the breakfast club, run by the Youth Support Coordinator and the school Chaplain, and stated: 'you get annoyed when you don't have any food … Sometimes they have breakfasts on … Oh, yeah, finally breakfast.' In order to ensure that these services were only accessed by those students who needed them, the Attendance Officer explained that: 'They have a sign-in process; so that it doesn't get abused. So the kids just come and sign in and say, they have got lunch on this day.'

In order to address other difficulties faced by families experiencing financial hardship, the Attendance Officer advised that: 'We have uniforms that have been donated … we purchase books and shoes … we budget for that sort of thing,' and the CEC explained that families were also able to sign on to a payment plan: 'it is as cheap as $10 a fortnight … at least then, once they have entered an agreement, the child gets textbooks and a diary.'

The Year 7 Coordinator also provided stationery packs for students in one class in particular who struggled with numeracy and literacy, but generally had good behaviour: 'There's a rubber, pencil, sharpener, ruler and pens. If they don't have their stuff … they can go to the cupboard and get one.'

The issue of equity for students on work experience and apprenticeships was also raised by the HOD Senior Pathways, who explained that some students' families were unable to afford the protective clothing required for the students to be on-site. The school addressed this problem by phoning several local businesses, which resulted in one local hardware shop supplying the school with a range of protective clothing, boots and other safety equipment. The HOD Senior Pathways stated: 'The students … book it out for the day; drop it back the next day or take it home and wash it, then we put it back in the cupboard.'

In order to encourage all students' participation in events such as sports carnivals, the Sports Coordinator explained that the school not only covered the costs of hiring the venues and parking, but 'we hire venues that look good and are really nice, to give them the opportunity to use those places that they probably wouldn't go into.'

Bullying was raised as an issue with several staff, who emphasised the importance of making students feel safe and comfortable at school. As a result, the school implemented a 'speak up, speak out' … anti-bullying policy … So any bullying or any discomfort … they fill out a form. It is dealt with the same day, if possible.' (School-based Police Officer)

6.10.11 Creating a positive school environment

There were concerted efforts to create a positive school environment within the school. One of the Year 7 teachers emphasised that, 'It's not about 'you have to sit exams'. It's about being comfortable, safe.' This was reflected in the response of one of the junior students, who described coming to school because it was at school where she felt safe and happy: 'I come to school to get away from everything … 'I live life like there's no tomorrow' … because I have had a lot of really bad past. When I come to school, I am always happy.' This students' description of school as a happy place, was reflected in the Year 7 Coordinator's explanation that the culture of the school was one 'that you can't really explain unless you feel it and you are in it.'

The School-based Police Officer explained the importance of inclusivity when attempting to create a positive and safe school environment: 'This is the kids' area … their place … You have to embrace who comes into the school.' This theme was taken up by the CEC, who emphasised the importance of establishing a culturally safe environment in order to: 'Instil a bit of cultural identity, so they stay on track, come to school regularly.' The HOD Student Engagement described the crucial importance of the CEC: 'One student and his family have come from the Cape … they are struggling in a big town … our CEC worked very closely with that family to get them settled at the start of last year … he has started to come more regularly because he feels more comfortable and knows that Aunty is there for him.'

The School-based Police Officer also discussed the way in which school staff approach inclusion: 'She [Attendance Officer] treats every child that's in front of her like they are the most important kid in this school … I don't think you can bottle that.' The parents similarly were impressed with staff, one stated that unlike primary school, the staff room had an open door policy: 'If the kids have an issue with an assignment or they don't know how to do something, it is not off-limits.'

The students emphasised the role that trust played in creating a positive school environment: 'There's trust between students and teachers at this school … Sure, there are some people that don't want that trust … but it's offered up to them anyway.' (Junior Student)

6.10.12 Addressing the needs of specific groups

The staff discussed four specific groups within the school community who needed additional support. The first of these, were the Indigenous students. In addition to the help of the three CEC officers, who also liaise with the Attendance Officer, there was also community help. One such organisation had recently joined the school to work with Indigenous male students. This organisation is an NGO which according to one of its representatives: 'used AFL originally to get these young [Indigenous] fellas to school … Football is no longer the key area. There's five pillars … health, sport, well-being, employment and leadership … and we then work with them a year after they leave school … We are not a satellite program; we don't come and go; we are here full-time.'

The HOD Student Engagement explained that the school was attempting to cater for students who were attaining very low levels of academic achievement: 'There is a handful at Year 1; a significant number at Year 2; and I think we have got a couple that bounced up to 3 and 4.' She went on to describe that they have been able to employ an additional teacher to assist these students.

Students who had been excluded or suspended were also considered as a group with specific needs. To cater for these students, the Youth Support Coordinator explained that, 'We always keep in contact with them, to see where they are at ... home visits, taking out enrolment forms; helping them to make appointments with TAFE; hooking them up with those services.'

Finally, staff described the shame experienced by many of their non-English speaking students: 'They say, 'Oh but I can't read like everybody else.' (Year 7 teacher). This teacher went on to describe how in addition to specialised English as a Second Language programs, the school offers homework clubs and lunchtime tutoring by teachers.

6.10.13 Engaging curricula and pedagogies

The Deputy Principal explained that reaching their goal of significantly improved attendance had presented a new challenge: 'Okay, we have got the kids here now. How do we engage them?' I think that is the thing; because some teachers are saying, 'Well they are here all the time and they are not doing the right thing.' And that's where we need to look at the pedagogy and go, 'What can we do differently?'

The issue of engagement was similarly raised by the HOD Junior Secondary: 'Engagement is still an issue … It's one that we still need to work on … I see the teachers really trying to make it as interesting as possible; introducing those digital literacies, the technology; doing different tasks a little bit differently … you can't keep them here, if what you are doing here isn't interesting and engaging … giving that education purpose.'

One teacher talked about the value of inquiry-based learning: 'Okay, we have to do World War II today … most of the class is Indigenous. 'Let's meet some of the Indigenous people who were involved.' And they would be like, 'Oh, I have got family who know him' … and all of a sudden they feel more a part of the learning.'

One of the Year 7 teachers made the distinction between 'fun' and 'engagement': 'You have to make the lessons fun … but stick to the curriculum.' She then provided examples of what engaging pedagogies looked like in her Maths and Science classes:

(1) 'I have got kids writing algorithms for Rubik's cubes.'

(2) 'I took the whole class … out to the basketball field. 'How am I going to get that ball from there to there?'... We had a protractor on the ground, measured it … 'Look at the angle. Next time, watch what JT (well known rugby league player Jonathan Thurston) does. He looks in the sky; he looks for movements in the wind'

(3) 'Why do I slam dunk every time I throw a piece of paper in that bin? It is the angle and the friction. It's Science and Maths'

(4) 'We went fishing and looked at angles … 'It is the angle that the fishing line is thrown at, the speed and distance and the time you throw it.'

The students also described the way engaging lessons affected them. One junior school student stated that: 'I have a History teacher … he's amazing. He makes it fun … I love my History class … I was literally jumping up and down in History because I actually passed for once because I have never passed History.' This student also described her enthusiasm for the school's Science Academy, which is 'extra science, for those who really love it … We get to do all this snazzy stuff … Like, we blew up eggs.'

6.10.14 Positive classroom environment

The positive school environment was also evident in the classrooms, with students describing the way: 'The teachers always say, 'come on, you did this. You can do it again'

and '[the teacher's] like, 'we are going to spend five minutes of Form with our eyes closed and just thinking about things that we like and that we love, and that we love about ourselves.'

The Year 7 teacher also described incorporating Indigenous language into her teaching practice, saying, 'It is an evolution of acceptance … I say 'you're not going gammon to me now, are you?[6] … You're a deadly[7] process.' The kids all have a giggle because it is Indigenous … They say, 'Miss, you deadly too.' So I speak a little bit [of their language] ... and the kids respect you for that, because the kids respect your language.'

6.10.15 Individual case management

The school had a very wide support network to facilitate individual case management. The School-based Police Officer explained that:

> The school is well-funded for the extra resources. When I first started here, it was one Guidance Officer, one Youth Support Worker who would only turn up so many hours a week … the school Nurse, one CEC and [the Attendance Officer] and me … now, there's two guidance officers, two youth support workers who are based here … We have got the psychologist … the Chaplain … the Head of Department for Behaviour … There is a bigger group that envelopes the problems that come into the school; plus the funding that's come for the extra people that come in and do programs. [The Foundation] has only just started.

This was supported by the HOD Student Engagement, who noted that 'we have such an enormous SWAT (Student Well-being and Attendance Team), about 15 of us, plus [The Foundation] now and all their guys. So that's a big support network, that we can grab a lot of kids and try and ferry them into where they need to go.' The Attendance Officer added that 'the team of social workers is growing all the time. Between us all, we identify the problem and then refer the family/student to the right people.'

One of the case management strategies was home visits, which were typically conducted by the School-based Police Officer and the Attendance Officer. They explained that these visits were friendly, rather than a 'big stick' approach, with 'most families … grateful that the

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[6] A word used by some Aboriginal people to mean joking generally. Usually pronounced *Gam'in'*.
[7] A word used by many Aboriginal people to mean excellent, or very good.

school cares enough to want to go around.' (Attendance Officer). The School-based Police Officer added that sometimes families experienced shame in needing to ask the school for help, 'So for the school to be on the front foot with it … puts the parent in a better mindset to attack the problem.'

The CECs described involving students in the process of support, so that 'the young person can sort of maintain their own safe strategies for in-class support.' They also described the school's incorporation of an Open Learning Centre (OLC), which is based on a short-term, one-to-one approach. However, she noted that 'there's a stigma about OLC, because they don't attend school like they attend here … might just go one or two days a week and maybe only a couple of hours; it just depends on where the child is sitting and what they are capable of.'

One of the CECs also explained that she mentored some students who were experiencing difficulties. This process involved constant mentoring for five weeks before reviewing the students' progress. She described the progress that these students made, which started with, 'I get slack to come to school' … [which] morphed into conversations around attendance, that morphed into, 'Well, I am Grade 10 now, so I pick my subjects.' So you become a companion in the end.'

While students requiring support with mental health were referred to specialists such as psychologists, the Youth Support Coordinator emphasised the importance of first building relationships with the students: 'A kid is not going to open up … until you have made a rapport with that kid.'

6.10.16 Working with parents/carers

The staff emphasised building relationships with families, as 'having the parents on board is really important because if they value time at school and the education, then we can work together to get the student here.' (Attendance Officer). For example, the Principal described how some parents were initially reluctant to engage with the school: 'They said, 'You don't know my family'. And that's when [the Attendance Officer] took the time and said, 'I want to know your family.'

One strategy was to phone parents when their child had worked hard, or reached a goal. One teacher described the impact of these calls on the students: 'Some parents … get a call,

'Oh, what's he done now?' 'Actually, I am here to say what a good job he's done this week.' … And then they come back and go, 'Wow, someone said something nice about my kid.' And then it makes a difference for the kid. They come in the next day and their parents have praised them. And they just put in more effort, without even thinking about it.'

The parents conveyed the way in which the teachers provided support for their students and families: 'I say to parents who have said, 'I have got an issue, 'contact the HOD. Contact your Year Coordinator… they will actually bend over backwards.'

6.10.17 Student views

The students discussed the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of attending school. The junior students spoke enthusiastically about the way 'we get lollies and things, at the end of each term … and all students, who get really good attendances, they get invited to the end of year activities … like [water park], snazzy things ...' However, when asked whether that rewards approach worked, she replied, 'Yeah, I guess for some people, they don't need the reward of a physical thing but it's more the reward of improving their grades.'

The Deputy Principal recounted a story where one of the senior boys had said to her, 'Well, you can go to other schools where you are good at something and you get into a program … [this school] takes students who want to be good and they make them good.'

The following exchange between two junior students exemplified the positive impact of the school's approach:

> Girl 1: I got bullied a lot when I was in Grade 7 … but because I had family problems I did want to go to school … I wasn't good at school then. But then I slowly - really slowly - started like, getting better marks. And then …
>
> Girl 2: You morphed into what you are now.
>
> Girl 1: What's that?
>
> Girl 2: 'Morphing' is like metamorphosis, like caterpillars turning into butterflies.

6.10.18 Teacher views

The staff tended to focus more on the next goal of engagement than the success of their attendance strategies. However, they thought the key to the school's current success was

teamwork: 'So we do work very well together. The SWAT team works very well together. At the end of the day, we all want the same outcome for the students; we want them every day; we want them learning; we want them to be successful.' (Attendance Officer). This was supported by the HOD Junior Secondary, who explained that 'everyone has to have a vested interest; that's how we shifted it.'

While teamwork was the focus of discussions relating to the success of the school's strategies, the Attendance Officer also noted that, 'consistency is one of the big things that seems to be working for the school.'

The staff emphasised that 'It takes time to develop procedures and to change the culture as well. So we can't just say, 'Oh, we are going to introduce this and it's going to change straight away.' You know, it could take three/four years. And we have seen this one; you know, you said five years, and it's taken that long to - you know, every year, it gets an increase. You know, it's still going to take a number of years to continue to improve it and to change little things.' (HOD Junior Secondary).

6.10.19 Parent and community views

The parents recognised the diversity of Queensland schools and the uniqueness of their own: 'There's no magic solution, I don't think. You can't put it down to one thing and say, 'Right, if you do this, it's going to improve the attendance at your school.'

Another parent asked, 'Is the school perfect? No. It is how they deal with issues that I am happy with … [following an incident with her child] when I came upstairs they were already interviewing about six witnesses … the next day there was a parade. I had half a dozen teachers come up to me and say, 'Is [she] okay?'

6.10.20 Summary

This school had an explicit focus on expectations, as opposed to rules. Stemming from this philosophical orientation, the school had developed a suite of strategies over the course of several years. These focused largely on staff teamwork, the school's clearance process, developing strong relationships with students, families and the community, addressing barriers to attendance, and a case management process which aimed at mentoring, early intervention and a friendly rather than 'big stick' approach. In addition, staff noted the

importance of language use regarding absenteeism, with staff reinforcing the notion that absence from school resulted in 'missing out on learning' rather than a punitive approach.

This case study demonstrated that a consistent and integrated approach, with a strong emphasis on teamwork, together with a focus on quality curricula and pedagogies and an inclusive school environment, simultaneously improved attendance and students' engagement with their schooling.

6.10.21 What have we learnt from this school?

There were several processes which were unique to this school. The first of these was the development of a 'clearance process' rather than a punitive approach, which was described as successful by staff and students alike.

Another significant breakthrough in this school was the finding that for some students, having some respite from the schooling environment, for example through completing certificate courses on a full-time basis, can result in students' re-engagement with their schooling. Equally celebrated by the school were those students who had been successful in gaining apprenticeships.

6.11 Conclusion to the case studies

Reflecting concerns within the literature regarding 'the lack of a clear and comprehensive definition of absenteeism' (Birioukov, 2016, p. 341), schools used various terms to discuss attendance and absenteeism. These included 'excused' or 'unexcused', and 'explained' or 'unexplained' absences, and less frequently, 'school refusal' and 'truanting', which was generally equated with 'wagging'.

The case study schools were situated in a wide range of socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts, echoing findings within the literature that absenteeism is 'a complex problem involving the joint effects of multiple factors' (Corville-Smith et. Al., 1998, p. 637). It was therefore evident that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach or 'single solution of panacea to resolve [absenteeism]' (Reid, 2010, p. 12), as described in other studies within the literature. However, it was evident that each school had developed their own suite of strategies to improve attendance, with several consistencies in their approaches which did make *a difference*, if not *the difference*.

The first of these was the systematic tracking of data, and communicating these data with the students and their families through data walls, visual posters, newsletters and social media, with all schools reporting that they rewarded and celebrated improvements in attendance data. School staff also followed up on these data closely, using SMS messages, phone calls and home visits to offer assistance rather than using punitive measures for unexplained absences. This intense focus on data, which was also found within the literature to be of substantive concern to Australian schools more broadly (Zubrick, 2014), was consistently found to be useful in identifying and monitoring students who needed assistance. However, there was evidence to suggest the need for caution to avoid overwhelming students with a constant stream of attendance data, with several participants reporting student anxiety, and students coming to school quite unwell rather than miss a day of school.

The schools addressed barriers faced by many students in low SES communities, such as lack of food, uniforms, transport and school items by providing breakfasts, lunches, uniforms, shoes, books and stationery. Students in multicultural schools often faced additional language barriers. In one school, a 'walking bus' provided a free, yet safe way for primary

school-aged children to travel to school. In several schools, staff reported that they actively worked to minimise the 'shame factor' by providing students with easy access to the things they needed. Several schools also had homework clubs and offered multicultural students additional assistance with learning English. In most cases, an Indigenous Liaison, CEC or teacher aide provided a vital link between the school and the local Indigenous community. In one school, several 'culturally appropriate' staff had been employed to support students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous, Pasifika and Vietnamese students.

While a few schools explicitly conveyed that they did not focus on rewarding attendance, preferring instead to focus on awareness and student engagement, all of the schools had some type of reward system in place. While many of these rewards were popular and served to enhance a positive school environment, in some cases they thwarted the schools' efforts to build strong relationships with their students and families who saw the requirements for participation as unfair. The literature additionally urges caution in relying on rewards to improve attendance: 'The use of incentives to lure a student into school belittles the role of a school and its purpose as a place of learning with the consequence that the key attraction becomes whatever the incentive is at the time' (Arthurs et al., 2014, p. 865).

Staff in several schools emphasised the importance of teamwork, and recognising that improvements in attendance cannot be achieved solely by an administrative Attendance Officer. Rather, administration staff, teachers, parents, students and communities need to work collaboratively to achieve both improved attendance and student engagement with learning. Further, they emphasised the importance of leadership in achieving these aims; a facet of improving attendance that is well established within the current literature (DeSocio et al., 2007).

The school staff rarely agreed with punitive measures, such as detentions and suspensions, for absenteeism. This position aligns with Reid's (2012) view that punishments, combined with failure, only serve to compound the problem of absenteeism. Rather, they focused on cultivating a positive school climate, which is recognised within the literature as essential to improving attendance as well as student engagement (see for example Van Eck et al., 2017; and McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). Central to enhancing school climate was the notion of

developing strong relationships with students, parents and the wider community, which is also established within the literature as an important factor in improving student attendance (Stone & Stone, 2011; Kearney, 2008).

These schools recognised that student attendance and engagement with their learning are not mutually exclusive; rather, each enhances the other. While they realised that they still had a way to go in achieving success in this goal, the staff were committed to engaging their students in quality curricula and pedagogies to facilitate student engagement. The importance of this approach is well documented within current research (McGregor et al., 2017) with young people reporting that they blame poor curriculum and pedagogy for their disengagement from schooling (Gase, et al., 2016).

Finally, these schools articulated a vision of high expectations for all students, which is recognised within the literature as crucial to achieving equitable learning outcomes (Mills & McGregor, 2014). However, staff in all schools emphasised that achieving improvements in student attendance is a process rather than a procedure, and as such, takes several years to accomplish. In other words, there is no quick-fix, or easy solution and thus, may not necessarily be easily transferrable to different contexts.

Chapter 7. A model to making every day count

There is no doubt, as demonstrated in the literature review, that ensuring high attendance levels for all students is of the utmost importance. Significant evidence exists to suggest that to 'cumulatively build knowledge, skills, intellectual capacity and academic success … requires regular school attendance' (Baxter & Meyers, 2016, p. 212). As the literature indicates, and as the analysis of the ROGs and DET attendance data demonstrate, attendance levels are lowest for Indigenous students, for those from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds, and for those living in remote areas. Furthermore, these factors are cumulative. The data collected from Principals also aligns with the view in the literature that attendance issues need to be addressed early in a student's school life. Zubrick (2014) for example, argued that patterns that develop in primary school are often intensified in high school.

In this section, a model is outlined which could frame future considerations regarding attendance. This model draws on the outcomes of this research as well as Kearney (2008), who indicates that for a model to be successful for enhancing attendance, it must:

> 1) Include terminology and definitions acceptable to a wide range of audiences (e.g. academics, practitioners, policy officers, parents) and those who approach the issues from different perspectives (e.g. psychology, sociology, law, education); and

> 2) Be comprehensive enough to address the various factors that contribute to absenteeism.

A third element is added to this model:

> 3) Every day at school must be made to count. There has to be an educational reason as to why it is critical for students to attend every day.

7.1   Developing common terminology and definitions

Across all of the schools that were visited, there were various terms used to describe attendance and absenteeism. These include 'excused' and 'un-excused' absences, 'explained' and 'unexplained' absences, 'truanting' and 'school refusal'. The researchers also noted in the literature that there has been a recent call to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. All of these various definitions beg questions, for example:

'Who is doing the excusing?'; 'Does an explained absence justify the student missing a day (or more at school)?'; 'Does truancy equate with a willful intention to not attend school?'; 'Does school refusal make sense given what may be awaiting a student at school?'; or 'Does a student's involuntary absence due to being taken on holiday equate with being hospitalised?'.

Clarity within schools is required for whole school communities, including parents, to know what constitutes an acceptable absence on the part of the school. In the vast majority of cases this was the situation. However, there appears to be a need to develop a common language related to school attendance that be used across all schools, especially in dealing with parents and students. For example, taking a student on holiday during term time can be 'explained' by a parent, the school knows the students whereabouts and that they are clearly not a 'truant' or 'school refuser', and the student has no choice but to go. However, there are schools in our study that would denote this as 'un-excusable' and the student would be denied privileges, and there are schools where the parent would be critiqued but the student not 'penalised'.

In the Principal interviews, it was found that a target attendance level of between 85 to 95% within most schools was acceptable. In some ways, differences were the product of the contexts in which schools were operating, and suggested targets were achievable but recognised meaningful gains for that school community. However, these differences at the lowest end could also be read as having lower, or deficit, expectations for some school communities. In line with the philosophy of *Every Day Counts*, there is a need to have high expectations of all students in relation to attendance. This is articulated by one principal in the present study who articulated that 'the target you set is the target you accept.' This is not to suggest that schools alone can overcome the inequities, which face particular communities; these require whole-of-government and community initiatives. However, practices grounded in equity principles would suggest that 'days at school' are a social and economic good to which all are entitled regardless of background, and hence there should be the same aspiration for all.

7.2 Developing a comprehensive approach

In setting high expectations, there needs to be practices in place that facilitate the achievement of such targets. This requires developing an understanding of the supports and barriers that enhance and inhibit high attendance. This means taking into account the broader social context in which students are living, as well as their personal circumstances and how the school is affecting, positively and negatively, attendance. As such, a comprehensive approach is required.

7.2.1 Understanding the data

One of the great strengths of the schools described in the principal interviews and evident in the case study sites was the use of data to understand the local context. In all cases the schools were on top of their data. They knew the individual students who were low attenders or were at risk of becoming low attenders; they knew which classes and year levels were demonstrating low attendance and they were tracking these over time. In most instances students and parents also knew how they were doing individually, as a class, year level and school. This in-depth understanding of data is crucial to improving attendance. However, what is done with these data is equally crucial.

7.2.2 Building bridges between school and home

Based on literature and data, there is no simple solution, no quick fix and no one model that fits all situations. However, successful approaches recognise that school and home do not operate in isolation from each other. In such schools, there is a concerted effort to build relationships with families and local communities. At times this will involve phone calls home, family liaison, invitations into the school, developing co-operative approaches to improving attendances, building connections with Indigenous Elders, employing a culturally diverse staff, and being open to parent and student feedback. It also involves teachers really coming to know the students in their classes and the issues they face at school, and usually at home.

7.2.3 Clearing the path for learning

Within communities where there were high levels of poverty there was, in the most part, a recognition that the school could undertake actions that supported students' attendance at school. Such schools would take the lead on working to ensure that students had transport

options for getting to school, that they could access food at school, and that they would receive appropriate uniforms and materials to enable them to fit in with their peers. In some cases this support would involve flexibility in relation to timetabling, the handing in of assignments and accessing privileges. Other instances included special facilities, such as one school that had an on-site crèche for young mothers.

7.2.4 Case management

In all schools, once students were identified as being in danger of becoming low attenders a vast array of supports would be put in place. In the less severe cases, this might be assigning a teacher as a mentor. In the more problematic cases, this might involve a deputy principal, and other professionals, counsellors, guidance officers, social workers, mental health workers and a variety of other external agencies. In such situations, the students were made to feel that they were wanted at school and that supports were available to them.

7.2.5 Culturally appropriate practices

Understanding cultural diversity was seen as paramount in many schools with diverse student populations. This meant, for example, recognising significant cultural events, such as NAIDOC week, acknowledging country on assemblies, understanding the importance of funerals for some students which might take them away from school for extended periods, ensuring appropriate family liaison practices through the employment of staff from the same cultural group, and welcoming relevant cultural organisations to work with students. However, in many cases it was considered that responding to cultural diversity should not represent a lowering of expectations as this would be discriminatory. This again does bring into sharp focus terminology and how 'absence' is to be understood.

7.2.6 Making schools a welcome place to be

Whilst there were many factors outside the school that had an impact on attendance, the literature, students, parents, teachers and principals recognise that improving attendance requires schools to be welcoming places. This entails a consideration of school climate, which incorporates encouraging and supportive student-teacher and student-peer relationships within schools. The vast majority of the principals interviewed emphasised the importance of positive relationships between teachers and students and between students. This was borne out by students' comments. The positivity in schools during site visits was

palpable, illustrated by the way in which teachers would go the extra mile for their students. Making sure that schools are safe is a critical component of a positive school environment.

7.2.7 Encouraging attendance through awards, celebrations and participation in specific activities

In most schools there were incentives for high attendance, and participation in fun, extracurricular activities and specific celebrations were often tied to a target level of attendance. In some schools, the rewards were significant materially (winning an iPad) or socially (participation in end of year celebration) and some were based on fun (occupying a gold class seat with popcorn on assembly). These rewards clearly worked to improve awareness about the importance of attendance. The latter tended to work towards enhancing the school climate. In relation to the former, in some schools, classes became fiercely competitive as they strived for whole class recognition, students in many schools could recite their level of attendance at any one time and students knew whether or not they were on track for participating in major events (school formal or end of year celebration). Whilst acknowledging the success that these practices have had in raising consciousness about every day counting, there is a need for caution in regards to the impact that they might have on school climate, especially for those unlikely to ever receive their benefits.

7.2.8 Sanctions

In nearly all schools, there were sanctions applied in relation to absences that were not deemed justified. These usually involved a detention of some kind. However, these were only seen as 'part of a package' of measures. In most instances, they were seen as counter-productive unless they entailed opportunities to catch up on missed work. They were also seen as contributing to resentment on the part of students who already had negative attitudes towards school. There was extremely little support for legislative measures being instigated against parents.

7.3 Making every day count

The findings of this study suggest, as does the literature and many of the principals interviewed, that ensuring attendance at school is necessary but not sufficient in relation to the social and economic goods available to students from their schooling, and in relation to the wider benefit to the community that comes from a first class schooling system. Having a

curriculum that is meaningful to students and pedagogical practices that challenge and engage students are a clear component of making schools attractive. However, they cannot be listed as one of the strategies that exist as part of a suite of practices. They are the central business of schooling and need to be emphasised on their own.

Schools should be striving to make their classrooms places where students want to be, not because of the external rewards or threat of sanctions, but because they are places where their imagination, thirst for knowledge, understandings of the world, and questionings about what is and what could be, are ignited. However, the findings of this study and the broader literature suggest that students' lives and personal circumstances can get in the way of them accessing such classrooms. A school-based model drawing on the suite of practices above has to be in place to address these barriers. However, increasing attendance data without making every day at school count educationally will be a hollow achievement.

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Appendix – Categorisation of attendance strategies

Q no	Question	Stage in admin cycle	Target of strategy	Nature of strategy
q30	Roll marking at least twice a day	Capture attendance information	na	na
q31	A dedicated phone line or email address for parents to advise of student absences	Capture attendance information	na	na
q38	Designated attendance officers to monitor student attendance at this school	Capture attendance information	na	na
q36	Investigate student attendance patterns using the OneSchool attendance monitoring dashboard	Investigate attendance patterns	na	na
q37	Discuss patterns of student absenteeism at staff meetings	Investigate attendance patterns	na	na
q40	Development of a revised school attendance policy	Design attendance policy	na	na
q41	Consulting with parents, students and staff on the development of the attendance policy	Design attendance policy	na	na
q17	Implementing targeted strategies to develop students' social/emotional skills	Preventative/general	Students	Support/building capability
q18	Implementing targeted strategies to improve student well-being (e.g. anti-bullying)	Preventative/general	Students	Support/building capability
q19	Implementing targeted strategies to ensure students feel connected to this school	Preventative/general	Students	Not categorised
q20	Implementing targeted strategies to strengthen the school's relationships with families	Preventative/general	Parent(s)	Not categorised
q21	Implementing targeted strategies to encourage families to value schooling	Preventative/general	Parent(s)	Communicating importance/expectations
q22	Extra-curricular activities offered to students after school	Preventative/general	Students	Activities to improve attractiveness of school
q23	Planned activities during lunch breaks that students look forward to	Preventative/general	Students	Activities to improve attractiveness of school

Q no	Question	Stage in admin cycle	Target of strategy	Nature of strategy
q24	Before-school activities that encourage students to get to school on time	Preventative/general	Students	Activities to improve attractiveness of school
q26	Events for parents (e.g. morning teas, information nights)	Preventative/general	Parent(s)	Not categorised
q27	Providing support programs that respond to specific needs (e.g. uniform exchange, breakfast program, walking bus, shoe exchange)	Preventative/general	Students	Support/building capability
q28	Peer tutoring/mentoring for students	Preventative/general	Students	Support/building capability
q42	Discussing the importance of student attendance in the classroom	Preventative/general	Students	Communicating importance/expectations
q43	Regularly provide reminders of the importance of student attendance during school assembly	Preventative/general	Students	Communicating importance/expectations
q44	Regularly provide reminders of the importance of student attendance for parents in newsletters and/or social media	Preventative/general	Parent(s)	Communicating importance/expectations
q45	Discuss the importance of attendance at parent information sessions	Preventative/general	Parent(s)	Communicating importance/expectations
q46	Use Every Day Counts video resources at parents information sessions or other events	Preventative/general	Parent(s)	Communicating importance/expectations
q49	Displaying posters/brochures promoting the importance of school attendance around local businesses	Preventative/general	Business	Communicating importance/expectations
q57	Scheduling events and activities on days that have traditionally poor attendance	Preventative/general	Students	Activities to improve attractiveness of school
q25	Reward programs that recognise improved or good student attendance	General response to non-attendance	Students	Support/building capability
q32	SMS texts sent to parents each time a student is absent	General response to non-attendance	Parent(s)	Not categorised
q33	Phone calls to parents seeking explanation of student absence	General response to non-attendance	Parent(s)	Not categorised

217

Q no	Question	Stage in admin cycle	Target of strategy	Nature of strategy
q34	Letters sent to parents advising of each individual unexplained student absence	General response to non-attendance	Parent(s)	Not categorised
q35	Meetings with parents to discuss poor student attendance patterns and to identify strategies for improvement	General response to non-attendance	Parent(s)	Not categorised
q39	Truancy sweeps by school staff (e.g. random visits to shops or skate parks)	General response to non-attendance	students	Control/Penalty/restrictive
q47	Collaboration with local businesses (e.g. students are not to be served during school hours)	General response to non-attendance	Business	Control/Penalty/restrictive
q48	Undertaking formal agreements with parents on student attendance	Response to poor attendance	Parent(s)	Control/Penalty/restrictive
q50	Referral of students with poor attendance to school support staff (e.g. guidance officer, Chaplain, Youth Support Co-ordinator)	Response to poor attendance	Students	Support/building capability
q51	Development and implementation of 'Individual Attendance Improvement Plans' for students	Response to poor attendance	Students	Control/Penalty/restrictive
q52	Implementation of disciplinary actions (e.g. detention for truancy)	Response to poor attendance	Students	Control/Penalty/restrictive
q53	Support for students returning to school after a substantial absence	Response to poor attendance	Students	Support/building capability
q54	Letters advising parents of their legal obligations for student attendance	Response to poor attendance	Parent(s)	Control/Penalty/restrictive
q55	Initiation of a prosecution process of parents who continue to neglect their legal obligations for student attendance	Response to poor attendance	Parent(s)	Control/Penalty/restrictive
q56	Discourage families from taking holidays during the school term	Response to poor attendance	Parent(s)	Control/Penalty/restrictive