Tasmanian Audit Office
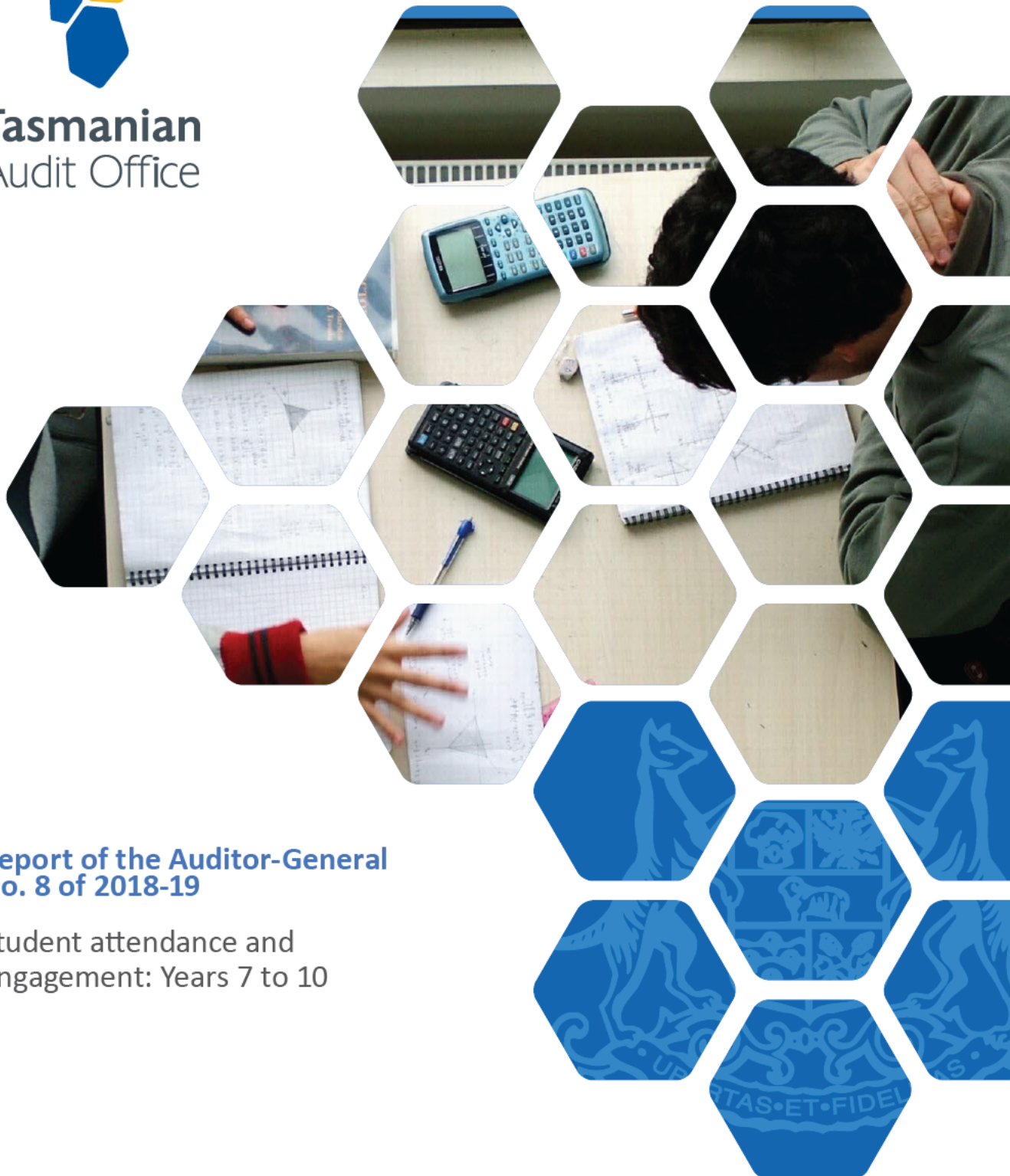
**Report of the Auditor-General
No. 8 of 2018-19**

Student attendance and
engagement: Years 7 to 10

March 2019

Strive • Lead • Excel | *To Make a Difference*

THE ROLE OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL

The Auditor-General's roles and responsibilities, and therefore of the Tasmanian Audit Office, are set out in the *Audit Act 2008 (Audit Act)*.

Our primary responsibility is to conduct financial or 'attest' audits of the annual financial reports of State entities. State entities are defined in the Interpretation section of the Audit Act. We also audit those elements of the Treasurer's Annual Financial Report reporting on financial transactions in the Public Account, the General Government Sector and the Total State Sector.

Audits of financial reports are designed to add credibility to assertions made by accountable authorities in preparing their financial reports, enhancing their value to end users.

Following financial audits, we issue a variety of reports to State entities and we report periodically to the Parliament.

We also conduct performance audits and compliance audits. Performance audits examine whether a State entity is carrying out its activities effectively and doing so economically and efficiently. Audits may cover all or part of a State entity's operations, or consider particular issues across a number of State entities.

Compliance audits are aimed at ensuring compliance by State entities with directives, regulations and appropriate internal control procedures. Audits focus on selected systems (including information technology systems), account balances or projects.

We can also carry out investigations but only relating to public money or to public property. In addition, the Auditor-General is now responsible for state service employer investigations.

Performance and compliance audits are reported separately and at different times of the year, whereas outcomes from financial statement audits are included in one of the regular volumes of the Auditor-General's reports to the Parliament normally tabled in May and November each year.

Where relevant, the Treasurer, a Minister or Ministers, other interested parties and accountable authorities are provided with opportunity to comment on any matters reported. Where they choose to do so, their responses, or summaries thereof, are detailed within the reports.

The Auditor-General's Relationship with the Parliament and State Entities

The Auditor-General's role as Parliament's auditor is unique.
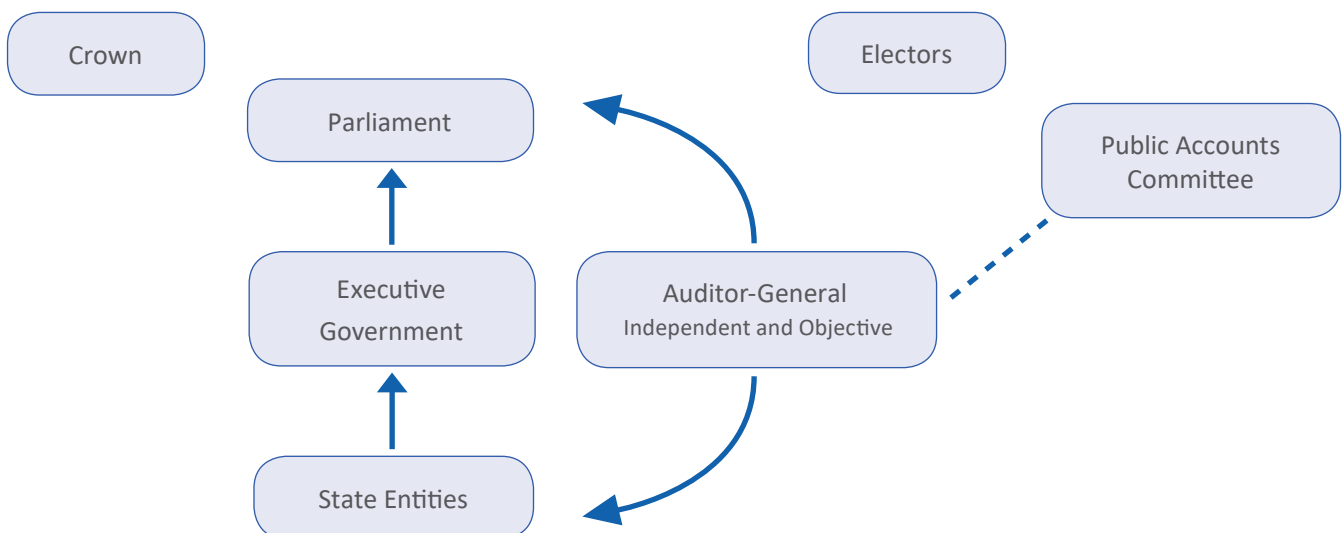
TASMANIA

**2019
PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA**

**Report of the Auditor-General
No. 8 of 2018-19**

**Student attendance and engagement:
Years 7 to 10**

March 2019

Presented to both Houses of Parliament pursuant to
Section 30(1) of the *Audit Act 2008*

21 March 2019

President
Legislative Council
HOBART

Speaker
House of Assembly
HOBART

Dear Mr President
Dear Madam Speaker

REPORT OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL
No. 8 of 2018-19: Student attendance and engagement: Years 7 to 10

This report has been prepared consequent to examinations conducted under section 23 of the *Audit Act 2008*. The objective of the performance audit was to express an opinion on the effectiveness of the management of student attendance and engagement in Years 7 to 10.

Yours sincerely

Rod Whitehead
Auditor-General

Page left blank intentionally

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page left blank intentionally

FOREWORD

Attendance and engagement at school is essential for students to emerge equipped with the knowledge and skills they need for the future. Consistent attendance at school is critical to achieving positive educational outcomes and keeping students engaged in their learning. While student attendance at school is a legal obligation of parents and carers under the *Education Act 2016*, Tasmanian government schools, in partnership with parents and carers, students and the wider community, must provide active support for full student attendance and engagement. Therefore, it is important that schools have effective, reliable policies, procedures and systems that record student attendance accurately and in a timely manner, to enable schools to identify whether any interventions or additional supports are required to promote consistent student attendance.

Attendance is, however, only part of the equation for good educational outcomes, as the level of participation and intrinsic interest a student shows in school is of equal importance. Some students indicate their level of engagement through observable signs in their behaviour (such as persistence, effort, attention) and attitudes (such as motivation, positive learning values, enthusiasm, interest, pride in success) or performance at school. However, research indicates that there is a significant proportion of students who are quietly and passively disengaged from learning. These students are behaviourally compliant and do enough work to sit above minimum standards, so their disengagement may not be indicated in data analysis. However, they may be disengaged to such an extent as to fall well short of reaching their full potential.

Schools, in partnership with families, have responsibility for the engagement of each student so that they continue to learn and reach their full potential. Tasmanian schools are expected to make use of data, from a range of sources, that gives an indication of students' level of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement and to identify early signs of disengagement. School staff are expected to work proactively to ensure that the school culture, structures, programs and processes are inclusive of all students and conducive to effective, engaged learning.

This audit examines how effectively the Department of Education collects information about student attendance and engagement and whether that information is used to improve students' educational outcomes.

Rod Whitehead
Auditor-General
21 March 2019

Page left blank intentionally

AUDITOR-GENERAL'S INDEPENDENT ASSURANCE REPORT

This independent assurance report is addressed to the President of the Legislative Council and the Speaker of the House of Assembly. It relates to my performance audit (audit) on student attendance and engagement in Years 7 to 10 in Tasmanian Government schools.

AUDIT OBJECTIVE

The objective of the audit was to form an opinion on the effectiveness of the Department of Education's (DoE) management of student attendance and engagement in Years 7 to 10.

AUDIT SCOPE

The audit examined information relating to full-time and part-time students in Years 7 to 10 at Tasmanian Government high schools over the period 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2017. However, some of the data collected related to 2018, including the school visits.

Work undertaken for this audit was limited to government schools.

Throughout this Report, unless otherwise specified, all figures and graphs represent data for government schools only with the following definitions used:

- 'Tasmanian schools' means all Tasmanian Government high schools
- 'high school' means any school teaching Years 7 to 10
- 'public school' means a government school
- 'year' means calendar year
- 'parent' means a person who has care, control or custody of a student[1]
- 'student' means a person enrolled in school[2]
- 'Year group' means the cohort of students enrolled in any one Year or Grade of school e.g. Year 7 or Year 8
- 'Years 7 to 10' means all students enrolled in all four Years 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Where average figures for Australian jurisdictions overall are used, the data represents Australia as a whole and includes all states and territories including Tasmania.

AUDIT APPROACH

The audit was conducted in accordance with Australian Standard on Assurance Engagements *ASAE 3500 Performance Engagements,* issued by the Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards Board, for the purpose of expressing a reasonable assurance conclusion.

The audit examined and analysed student attendance and engagement information related to Years 7 to 10 at Tasmanian Government high schools over the period 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2017 and included discussions with selected DoE employees.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY

DoE was responsible for managing student attendance and engagement for Years 7 to 10 in Tasmanian Government high schools for the time period covered by this audit.

AUDITOR-GENERAL'S RESPONSIBILITY

In the context of this audit, my responsibility was to express a reasonable assurance conclusion on the extent to which DoE effectively manages student attendance and engagement related to Years 7 to 10 at Tasmanian Government high schools.

---

1   Parent is defined in Section 5 Interpretation of the *Education Act 2016* as including (a) a legal guardian of a child; (b) another person who has the care, control or custody of a child; and (c) another person who generally acts in the place of a parent of a child and has done so for a significant length of time.

2   Student is defined in Section 5 Interpretation of the *Education Act 2016* as a child, youth or person who has (a) enrolled at a school; or (b) provided with home education; or (c) participating in an approved learning program.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings and recommendations for the audit criteria used to assess whether the intended outcomes were achieved are summarised below. The recommendations represent actions DoE should undertake. Further details regarding the audit criteria are contained in Appendix 1.

Findings and Recommendations
Criterion 1   What does the attendance and engagement data show?

Summary of findings

The average attendance rate[3] of 88% for Tasmanian high schools has not substantively changed between 2014 and 2017. The attendance rate is consistently 2% lower than the Australian average meaning students were attending fewer days in Tasmania.

The attendance level[4] for Tasmanian high schools dropped from 65% to 63% between 2014 and 2017 meaning fewer students are at or above a 90% attendance rate. This drop is comparable with the drop in the Australian average attendance level, which dropped from 69% to 67%.

In 2017, 91% of Tasmanian students began high school in Year 7 with an acceptable attendance rate but by Year 10 the rate had dropped to 85%. In comparison, across Australia 92% of students began high school in Year 7 with an acceptable attendance rate but by Year 10 it dropped to 88%.

Attendance rates are highest in Term 1 at the start of the school year in each Year group. Year 10 has the steepest rate of decline, from 87% in Term 1 of 2017 to 80% in Term 4. In Years 7 and 8, some of the additional absences in the winter months of Term 3 were recovered in Term 4, but not in Years 9 or 10.

A correlation was found between the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score and attendance rate and level for Tasmanian schools, meaning the higher an ICSEA score for a school, the higher the attendance rate and attendance level.

No correlation was found between attendance rate and level and school remoteness and there was only a limited correlation between attendance rate, level and school size.

The proportion of students in all categories of educational risk has progressively increased from 2014 to 2017 and the number of students in each category of educational risk progressively increased from Year 7 to Year 10 in 2017.

Schools with low ICSEA scores have the most students at educational risk. The lower the ICSEA score, the greater the propensity for students to be at moderate or severe educational risk.

Student engagement records are largely student centric and do not provide performance data that can be analysed or reported over time. While annual satisfaction surveys, and the summary reports produced therefrom are useful in identifying changes in levels of engagement, they do not define or report performance measures or targets specific to student engagement.

Recommendation

1. Consider analysing absence data for students in each Years 7 to 10 according to educational risk categories - particularly in schools with a low ICSEA rating — with a view to establishing initiatives that make a positive difference for disadvantaged students.

---

3   Attendance rate - the number of full time equivalent (FTE) student days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible student days over the period.

4   Attendance level - the proportion of full-time students whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90% over the period.

Findings and Recommendations

Criterion 2   Is student attendance managed effectively?

2.1   Is student attendance recorded, monitored, reported and analysed?

Summary of findings

DoE has established appropriate systems and processes to identify and record student attendance and absence data so as to meet national reporting requirements.

DoE data management includes quality checks that generate appropriate exception emails. However, testing of the recording of student attendance and absence data at selected schools identified:

- inconsistencies in the way parents of students absent without an explanation were contacted

- students being recorded as absent when they were present at an approved extra-curricular activity

- inconsistencies in the way categories of absence were being interpreted and absences recorded.

DoE has established appropriate systems and processes to monitor student attendance and absence and had taken appropriate action as required under the *Education Act 2016* (Act) and in accordance with DoE policy and procedures.

DoE has reported to the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in compliance with the national reporting requirements and DoE has commenced developing a business intelligence system to gather and report more attendance and absence information. DoE only reported one figure for attendance in annual reports, which represented the average daily attendance for the whole school for the whole year and did not identify any trends or differences between Year groups.

Absence information is available to DoE executive and management but no evidence was found to confirm it is reviewed on a regular or systematic basis.

Recommendations

2.   Reinforce the use of documentation and self-directed online training modules to increase the reliability of data entry.

3.   Consider using attendance information to measure DoE and school performance.

4.   Report attendance data for each year group in annual reports.

5.   Analyse and report absence information on a regular and systemic basis to identify any trends and measure the effect of initiatives to improve attendance and reduce absenteeism.

Findings and Recommendations

2.2 Is student attendance data used to inform decisions and responses?

Summary of findings

The process to identify, monitor, report and analyse student attendance is mainly focused on individual students with an intervention escalation process adopted to resolve attendance issues of increasing concern. In examining the process, no definition of what constitutes acceptable attendance was stated and there were no documented steps to follow to cease the escalation process.

DoE collects information on attendance and absence but no evidence was found to show that this data is used to effectively monitor trends or establish improvement targets for students at highest educational risk.

The data shows increasing levels of student risk from Years 7 to 10 and for schools with a low ICSEA score. While DoE had implemented risk management policies and processes, there was limited agency information about risks relating to attendance at both a strategic and operational level.

Recommendations

6. Define performance measures and targets for student attendance.

7. Monitor trends and establish improvement targets for students at highest educational risk.

8. Identify and manage risks to student attendance in Years 7 to 10.

2.3 Does DoE involve parents and others in improving student attendance?

Summary of findings

The Act articulates the role parents have in their child's education including a responsibility to ensure their child receives an education. The government also has a responsibility to support parents in ensuring they meet their responsibilities under the Act.

DoE recognises the value of community engagement in improving student attendance and engagement. DoE's 'Community Partnerships' initiative supports parents as key stakeholders in a child's education. During school visits evidence of some community involvement was obtained but no formal reporting was identified that showed the effectiveness of efforts to engage parents to improve attendance or engagement.

It was identified that little information was documented in school improvement plans about involving parents in improving attendance (or engagement).

Recommendation

9. Consider providing further clarity to schools regarding the inclusion of targets in school improvement plans for improved parent, community and stakeholder engagement.

2.4 Does DoE support and measure improvement in student attendance?

Summary of findings

DoE provided a high level implementation plan for a 2017-18 budget initiative to review and revise the school improvement framework. Outcomes of the framework included transparent and consistent measures of each school's performance. However, there was no evidence that the review would specifically identify performance targets or measures for student attendance.

Although DoE reports attendance rates, the performance targets or measures for high school attendance were not identified in any DoE performance reports.

Recommendations

10. Complete the implementation of the initiative to review and revise the school improvement framework.

11. Include development of performance targets and measures as part of the revision of the school improvement framework.

12. Include targets and measures for attendance rates and levels for Years 7 to 10 for Tasmania in school improvement plans.

2.5 Does DoE have strategies for managing and improving student attendance?

Summary of findings

DoE's 2018-2021 Strategic Plan was deliberately kept at a high level to act as a reference document with the intent that each school would prepare its own annual school improvement plan.

Targets for student attendance were not consistently included in school improvement plans.

The Annual School Performance Information for Review of Education (ASPIRE) is designed to enhance the monitoring and reporting of data for each school and will include attendance levels, but:

- no targets for attendance levels in school improvement plans were identified
- information was not disaggregated by Year group.

Recommendation

13. Continue to develop ASPIRE focusing on further detail and setting targets for improved attendance in Years 7 to 10.

Findings and Recommendations

Criterion 3   Is student engagement managed effectively?

3.1   Is student engagement recorded, monitored, reported and analysed?

Summary of findings

DoE has an Engagement and Retention Policy and Student Engagement Procedures that aim to:

- clarify the expectation that all staff working with children and young people from the early years to Year 12 take responsibility for ensuring optimal levels of engagement, retention and educational attainment
- provide a consistent approach to the provisions made by schools to engage their students, including the establishment, implementation and monitoring of re-engagement programs.

It was identified that:

- School staff record engagement information in student support system (SSS) records and monitor student engagement using reports accessible through ed*i*, however, these records were student centric.
- DoE has established four levels of programs designed to address problems with student engagement.
- DoE undertakes an annual satisfaction survey across all schools and Education Performance and Review (business unit within DoE) collates responses and provides summary reports to schools. The summary reports allow staff to compare results with the previous year and permits a statewide comparison. The satisfaction survey is also used for school improvement planning.
- Education Performance and Review provide a statewide summary report to the DoE executive, which is based on the results from all schools, Kinder to Year 12, but the report does not disaggregate data for Years 7 to 10.

However, no definition of performance measures, or targets, specific to student engagement and no evidence of requirements or systems to report the performance of alternative learning programs were found.

DoE has a structure of intervention to minimise the impacts of student disengagement, however, no source of information that detailed the benefits over time could be found.

Recommendations

14.   Develop a system to identify signs of disengagement and tools to be used by schools for structured analysis of information.

15.   Consider undertaking further work to clarify and agree on the information to be recorded, reported and monitored regarding student engagement and establishing improvement targets.

16.   Undertake a benefits analysis to determine the level of success of interventions and determine where best to invest funds using measurable performance targets.

3.2   Is student engagement data used to inform decisions and responses?

Summary of findings

Whilst acknowledging information from the annual satisfaction surveys is used to assist in decision making, there is an absence of engagement performance data being regularly reported and analysed to better inform decision making. However, the lack of performance data does not mean that decisions are not being made to improve engagement.

Recommendation

17.   Consider how information regarding student engagement can be monitored and analysed to better support DoE and school decisions and responses.

Findings and Recommendations

3.3 Does DoE involve parents and others in improving student engagement?

Summary of findings

The Act, the Engagement and Retention Policy and the Student Engagement Procedures all recognise the need for collaboration between parents and educators for student engagement.

DoE involves parents and others in improving student engagement by providing information to encourage communication between parents, teachers and students on the DoE website, in school newsletters, via social media and through the provision of various family support programs.

3.4 Does DoE support and measure improvement in student engagement?

Summary of findings

As noted in Section 3.1, no definition of performance measures, or targets, specific to student engagement were found.

Research by the Grattan Institute and feedback from DoE satisfaction surveys together with audit evidence indicates classroom behaviour is an important factor that impacts on student engagement. Students who are attentive and engaged and want to learn but find the behaviour of other students disruptive may gradually find learning difficult and begin their own cycle of disengagement.

Feedback from students showed only 60% felt fully encouraged to do their best. More students in Years 7 and 10 felt fully encouraged to do their best than in Years 8 or 9.

More Year 7 students felt their learning styles were accommodated than Year 10 students. Year 10 students indicated that their expectations of the delivery of learning styles by teachers were significantly higher than their experience of the learning styles delivered by teachers.

The National School Improvement Tool provides a guide for schools developing their school improvement plans.

Recommendations

18. Ensure schools use information that identifies issues that most affect student engagement when preparing school improvement plans.

19. Align satisfaction survey questions to issues that most affect student engagement to provide meaningful information for determining actions.

20. Investigate schools with improving survey results and formally share their strategies with other less successful schools.

21. Ensure teachers are provided with professional learning and development that focusses on maintaining student engagement.

22. Provide opportunities for less effective teachers to observe more effective teachers in the classroom and provide mentoring opportunities with a view to improving teacher performance.

3.5 Does DoE have strategies for managing and improving student engagement?

Summary of findings

While DoE has developed a risk management policy, it has yet to develop a risk register that identifies risks to student engagement.

Recommendation

23. Ensure the development of a risk register that identifies risks to student engagement and which also develops mitigation strategies for any identified risks.

SUBMISSIONS AND COMMENTS RECEIVED

In accordance with Section 30(2) of the *Audit Act 2008*, a summary of findings was provided to the Treasurer, Minister for Education and Training and other persons who, in the opinion of the Auditor-General, had a special interest in the report, with a request for submissions or comments. Responses, or a fair summary of them, are included in Appendix 2.

AUDITOR-GENERAL'S CONCLUSION

It is my conclusion that key elements are in place within policies, processes and systems to support DoE's effective management of student attendance and engagement for Years 7 to 10. Whilst the framework for managing student attendance and engagement is effective, it could be enhanced by further investment in improving student attendance data quality, better defining and capturing student engagement data, enhancing monitoring and reporting systems and establishing and monitoring performance targets for acceptable attendance and engagement.

Rod Whitehead

Auditor-General

21 March 2019

CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

A good education enhances a student's opportunities for future success and obtaining the best outcomes from education is a function of a student's attendance and engagement.

Students who regularly attend school have significantly greater opportunities to achieve lifetime advantage through employment, better physical and mental health and reduced likelihood of involvement with the justice system. Students who are regularly absent from school are at greater risk of missing out on these advantages and of being caught in a cycle of disadvantage.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

In Tasmania, the legislative framework for education includes the *Education Act 2016* (Act), Education Regulations 2017, Ministerial Instructions and Secretary's Instructions.

The Act provides:

- every child and young person in Tasmania with the opportunity to continue to learn and reach their full potential so they can live fulfilling lives and contribute positively to our community
- schools with an up-to-date legal framework that better supports the high quality teaching and learning in Tasmania's schools, focused on supporting attendance, engagement, retention and attainment of Tasmania's students.

The Act specifically promotes regular attendance of school-aged children by requiring parents to ensure children attend school every day, or receive home education or participate in an individual education program, unless exempted or excused as allowed under the Act. In practice, regular school attendance is a shared responsibility that requires parents, schools, communities, DoE and other government agencies to work together to achieve optimum outcomes.

The Act also introduced the following key changes relating to attendance:

- a new set of limited circumstances in which a student can be authorised not to attend school
- an updated process for parents or independent youths to apply for part-time attendance.

DoE's implementation of the Act was guided by *Education: Tasmania's Future* and included establishing the Office of the Education Registrar (Registrar). Schools can now refer continued, unexplained non-attendance to the Registrar to begin a compulsory conciliation conference process whereby students, parents and school principals can discuss and agree on how best to support a student's attendance. This process recognises that unauthorised student absences from school can be for many complex reasons.

STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Student attendance is guided by DoE's Attendance Policy and Process, which states that a student is considered present (and therefore attending) when they are in class or off campus on an approved activity. The Attendance Policy and Process requires DoE to:

- provide effective enrolment, attendance and participation practices and tailored educational opportunities that promote student engagement and attendance
- record, report and monitor student attendance at government schools
- manage absences.

The Attendance Policy and Process describes the responsibility of parents and the shifting of accountability for effective recording and management of student attendance to each school. The Attendance Policy and Process also contains requirements and guidance relating to:

- recording attendance
- processing applications for part-time attendance
- excusing a student from attendance
- managing unauthorised absences
- managing absences of overseas students
- appointing an authorised person (to investigate absences to help resolve non-attendance)
- referring absences to the Registrar (to identify and resolve non-attendance).

Schools use the Attendance Policy and Process as a template to develop their own attendance policy by adding school specific information.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism and passion that students show when learning or being taught and extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education. Educators[5] understand that learning requires genuine student engagement both in and out of school.

Student engagement is guided by DoE's Engagement and Retention Policy,[6] which states that all staff working with young people, from the early years to Year 12, take responsibility for ensuring optimal levels of engagement, retention and educational attainment.[7] The Engagement and Retention Policy recognises that:

- engagement and retention are critical factors in determining a student's educational attainment, which impacts significantly on their future learning, work and life opportunities
- each student is entitled to make progress within relevant curriculum frameworks in a learning program responsive to their needs and aspirations within a safe and inclusive environment.

The Engagement and Retention Policy defines engagement with education as including three interrelated components:

1. Behavioural engagement, which refers to students' participation in education, including academic, social and extracurricular activities of the school and is reflected in their attendance and adherence to behavioural expectations.

2. Emotional engagement, which encompasses students' emotional reactions in the classroom and school that is reflected in the relationships they have with their peers, teachers and their sense of belonging and connectedness.

3. Cognitive engagement, which relates to students' investment in learning and is reflected in their intrinsic motivation and self-regulation.

All components are influenced by parents, teacher interaction, the physical school environment, students' physical and emotional well-being, family circumstances and access to learning resources.

---

5   DoE's Student Engagement and Retention Policy defines educators as teachers, support teachers, school leadership staff, teacher assistants and those involved in providing early childhood education and care programs.

6   DoE's Student Engagement and Retention Policy defines student retention as the outcome of retaining students in an approved learning program until completion of Year 12.

7   DoE's Student Engagement and Retention Policy defines educational attainment as the highest level of schooling a student has participated in and completed.

DoE's Engagement and Retention Policy states that student engagement, retention and educational attainment will be maximised by educators and by implementing the following:

- working collaboratively with families in an ongoing partnership from birth to Year 12

- personalising learning by ensuring teaching is data-informed and differentiated to accommodate the learning needs, strengths and goals of every student

- providing balanced, flexible and responsive learning and training programs, including extra-curricular activities, that enable each student to attain Year 12 or equivalent

- providing effective support for each student and their family at key transition points

- working with students and families to resolve issues or change attitudes causing non-attendance

- providing a safe environment where learners feel connected, can form positive relationships and that supports learning effectively

- implementing school structures and processes (including learning plan procedures) that facilitate collaboration between educators and professional support teams, in consultation with families, to provide effective support for students

- engaging with professional learning that builds capacity and self-efficacy in relevant areas of expertise.

DETAILED FINDINGS

1. WHAT DOES THE ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT DATA SHOW?

In evaluating attendance and engagement data we examined:

- national reporting of attendance rates and levels
- Tasmanian attendance rates and levels and the Index of Community Socio-educational Adavantage (ICSEA) scores.

1.1 National reporting

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for collecting, managing, analysing, evaluating and reporting statistical and related information about educational outcomes. This includes the development of national key performance measures (KPMs) for reporting the performance of Australian schooling.

ACARA publishes the annual national report on schooling in Australia on behalf of Australian education ministers, meeting as the Education Council. The *National Report on Schooling in Australia 2016* reports on the nationally agreed KPMs for student participation, achievement and attainment and provides statistics on school and staff numbers, student enrolments and school funding. These KPMs include the following measures for student attendance:

- attendance rate - the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) student days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible student days over the period
- attendance level - the proportion of full-time students whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90% over the period.

ACARA is also responsible for collecting data from schools for the purpose of accountability and reporting, research and analysis and resource allocation. Since 2010, information on individual schools is published on the *My School* website (www.myschool.edu.au).

We compared Tasmanian attendance rates and levels to the average to all Australian jurisdictions, with the results shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Average attendance rates and levels - Years 7 to 10 - Government schools 2017
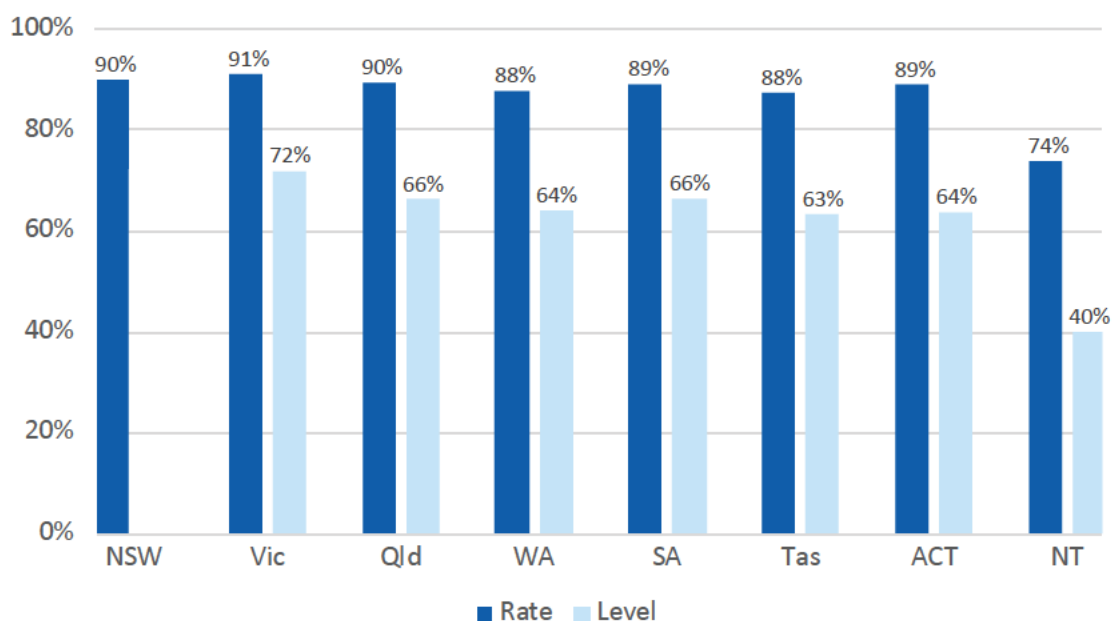
Source: TAO, ACARA. Note: Level data not reported by NSW.

Figure 1 shows that:

- Victoria had the highest attendance rate and level of any jurisdiction
- Northern Territory had the lowest attendance rate and level of any jurisdiction
- all other jurisdictions had attendance rates between 88% (Tasmania and Western Australia) and 90% (Queensland)
- all other jurisdictions had attendance levels between 63% (Tasmania) and 66% (Queensland and South Australia).

Results for Tasmania were not significantly different from any other jurisdictions apart from Victoria and the Northern Territory.

We compared Tasmania's attendance rates and levels to the average of all Australian jurisdictions from 2014 to 2017 with the results shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Average attendance rates and levels - Years 7 to 10 - 2014 to 2017
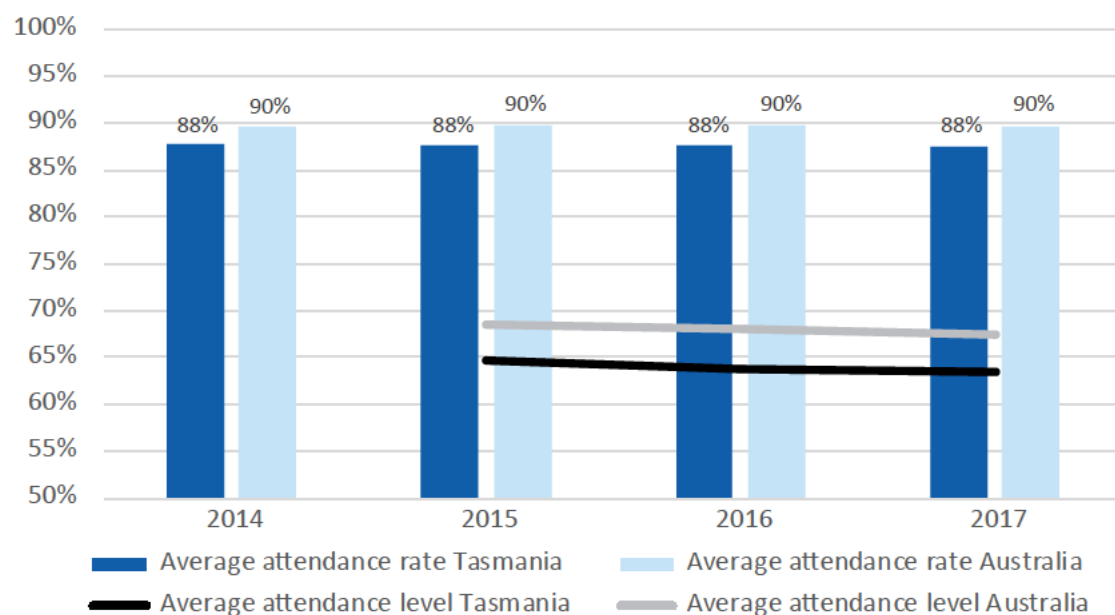
Source: TAO, ACARA. Note: ACARA began reporting attendance rates in 2014 and attendance levels in 2015.

Figure 2 shows that over the four-year period, for Tasmanian schools, the:

- attendance rate has not changed and is 2% lower than the Australian average meaning students are attending fewer days in Tasmania
- attendance level has dropped by 2% (also dropped by 2% across Australia) meaning fewer students are at or above a 90% attendance rate.

Research has shown attendance at school gradually deteriorates from Year 7 to Year 10 across all jurisdictions. We compared the average attendance rates from Year 7 to Year 10 for Tasmanian schools with the average for Australia for the period 2014 to 2017 with the results shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Average attendance rates Years 7 to 10 - Tasmania and Australia - 2014 to 2017
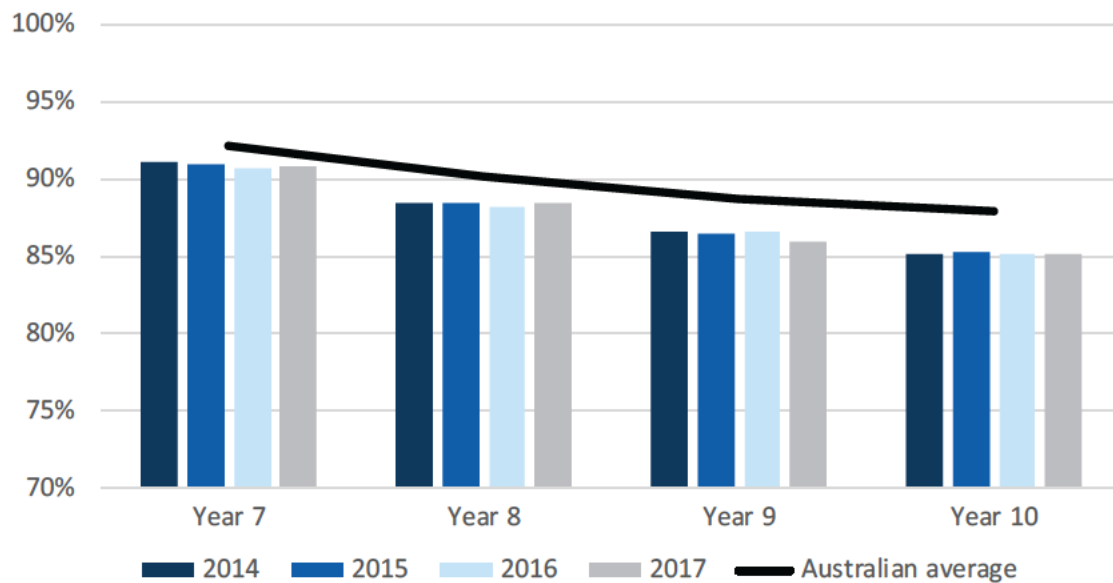
Source: TAO, ACARA

Figure 3 shows that over the period:

- attendance rates across Australia declined from 92% in Year 7 to 88% in Year 10
- the Tasmanian attendance rate for Year 7 was 91% but by Year 10 it dropped to 85% meaning 6% of students are progressively missing out on the value of regular attendance at school. A 6% deterioration in attendance rate represents an additional 244[8] student absences in Year 10 compared to Year 7.

There is little evidence of Australian or international benchmarks for optimum rates or levels of student attendance. A 2013 report published by the Commonwealth Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations referred to research undertaken in Western Australia and defined student attendance in the context of the following three categories of 'at risk' students:

- Indicated educational risk – 80% to 89% attendance - missing up to one full day per week
- Moderate educational risk - 60% to 79% attendance - missing one to two full days per week
- Severe educational risk - less than 60% attendance - missing more than two full days per week.

Being absent from school for 10% or less of the time equates to around 19 days of absence per year. However, as previously stated, every day at school counts toward attainment and students are strongly encouraged to maintain as high an attendance rate as possible.

1.2 Tasmanian reporting

Attendance rate and level

DoE reports attendance data to ACARA who report an annual average of attendance rates and levels for all schools. Information on ACARA's website can be filtered by school, by Year group and by school type. DoE reports an annual average of the daily attendance rate for each school to clarify key datasets released to support its annual reports. We did not find any reports of attendance levels in DoE's annual reports for 2014 to 2017 and we were unable to identify any changes in either attendance rates or levels throughout a school year or between Year groups.

Tasmanian school attendance level for Years 7 to 10 was reported in the 2018-19 Budget paper, as a performance measure of access, participation and engagement. The Budget paper reported the actual attendance level of 63.7% for the year in 2015-16 and 63.4% for 2016-17. Attendance rates were not reported in the Budget papers.

---

8   6% of 4 061 students enrolled in Year 10 in Tasmanian schools in 2017 = 244 students.

We examined the annual average daily attendance rate by term collected by DoE to compare performance between Years 7 to Year 10 for the 2017 school year. The results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Tasmanian average daily attendance rate by Year group - Years 7 to 10 - 2017
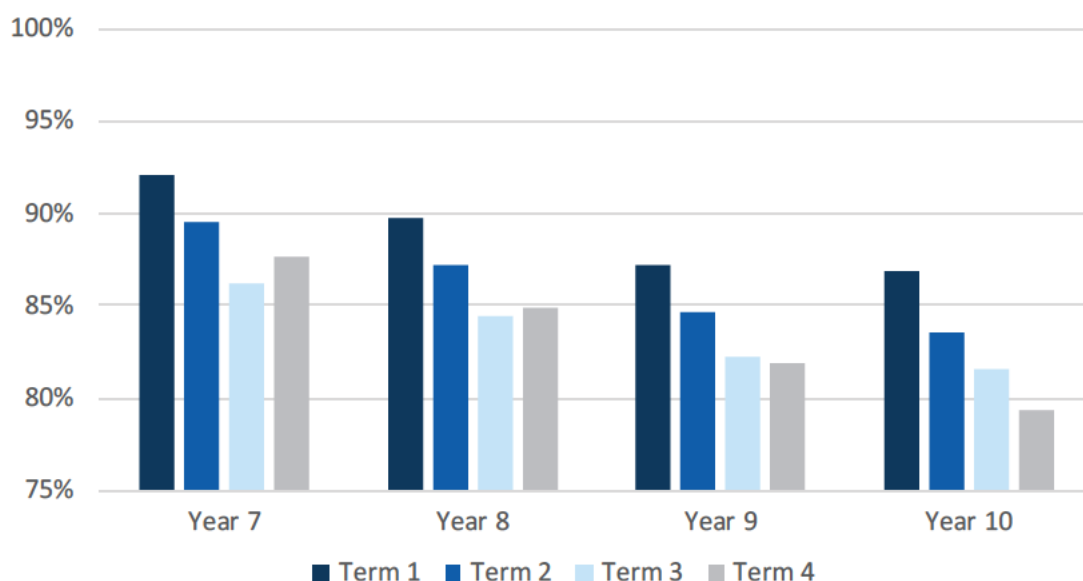
Source: TAO, DoE. Note: results for 2014, 2015 and 2016 showed similar patterns.

Figure 4 shows a decline from Year 7 to Year 10 overall as well as a decline from Term 1 to Term 4 in all the Year groups. Attendance is highest in Term 1 at the start of the school year in each Year group. The data shows some of the absences that occur in the winter months of Term 3 are recovered in Term 4 for students in Year 7 and Year 8, but not in Year 9 or Year 10. Data for Year 10 shows the steepest rate of decline, from less than 87% in Term 1 to less than 80% in Term 4.

Index of community socio-educational advantage

The *My School* website facilitates comparison of results between schools with students from similar socio-educational backgrounds using ICSEA, which was developed by ACARA in 2010 to:

- compare results for schools with students from similar socio-educational backgrounds
- enable fair comparisons of NAPLAN results between schools on the *My School* website
- respond to research showing that the educational performance of students, inter alia, is related to certain characteristics of their family (such as parental education and occupation) and school (such as location and socio-economic background of the students it serves).

ICSEA represents the educational advantage of a school's students and is calculated using information about parents'/carers' occupation and education, school geographical location and the proportion of indigenous students that a school caters for.[9] The higher the ICSEA score, the more educationally advantaged the school's students are.

We undertook analysis to determine whether there was any correlation between attendance rate and attendance level in Years 7 to 10 in Tasmania and:

- ICSEA
- school location as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as a Regional Area score (RA) (i.e. remoteness)
- school size by FTE enrolments.

We noted moderate correlation between attendance rate and level and the ICSEA score as shown in Figure 5.

---

9   A school's ICSEA score is not based on the wealth of parents/students or the resources of a school and is not a rating of the school, its staff or teaching programs, nor of student performance.

Figure 5: Tasmanian schools attendance rates and levels and ICSEA scores - 2017

- ICSEA scores for individual high schools
- Trendline (average attendance rate)
- Trendline (average attendance level)
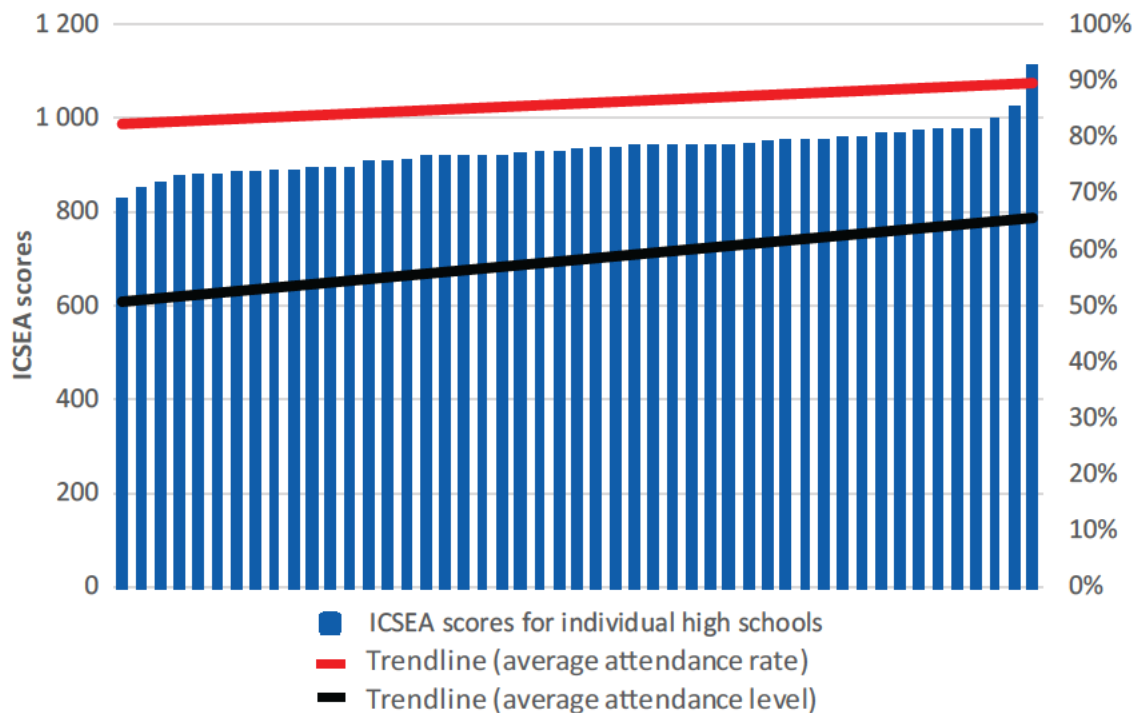
Source: TAO, ACARA

Figure 5 shows a high degree of correlation between ICSEA score and attendance rate and level, leading us to conclude, the higher an ICSEA score, the higher the attendance rate and level.

We found no correlation between attendance rate and level and school remoteness and minimal correlation between attendance rate and level and school size.

Student absence and educational risk

We analysed absences and educational risk in high schools over the period 2014 to 2017, the results are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Percentage of students by category of educational risk from 2014 to 2017

	Severe risk (< 60% attendance)	Moderate risk (60% to 79% attendance)	Indicated risk (80% to 89% attendance)
2014	6.7%	11.5%	22.2%
2015	7.2%	11.6%	23.3%
2016	7.2%	11.7%	22.3%
2017	7.5%	12.1%	23.7%
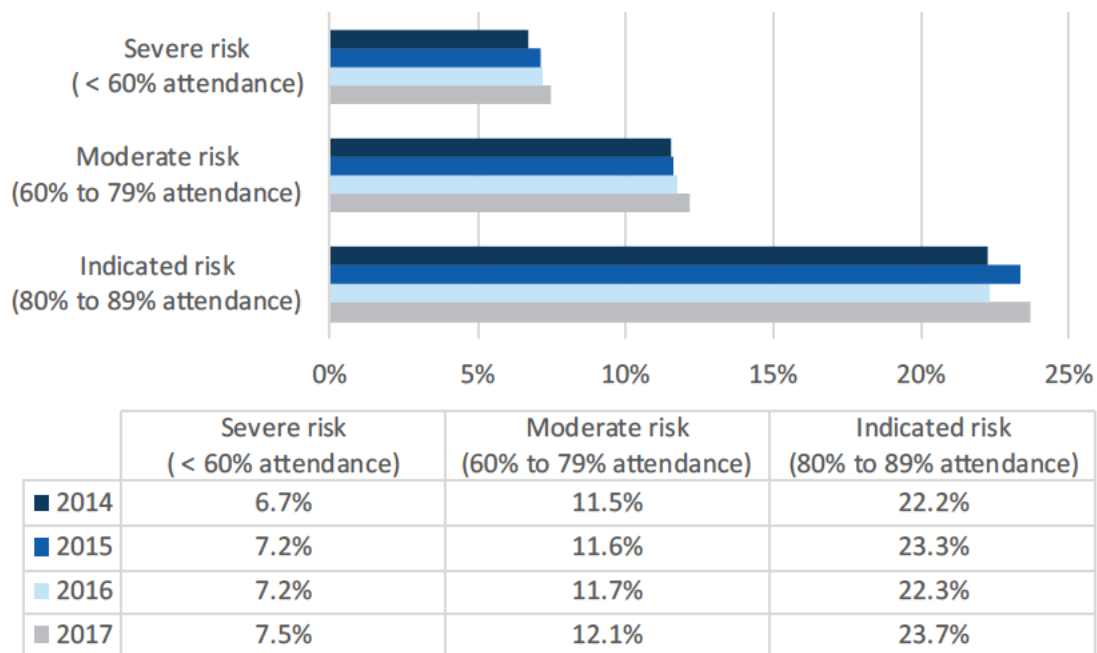
Source: TAO, DoE

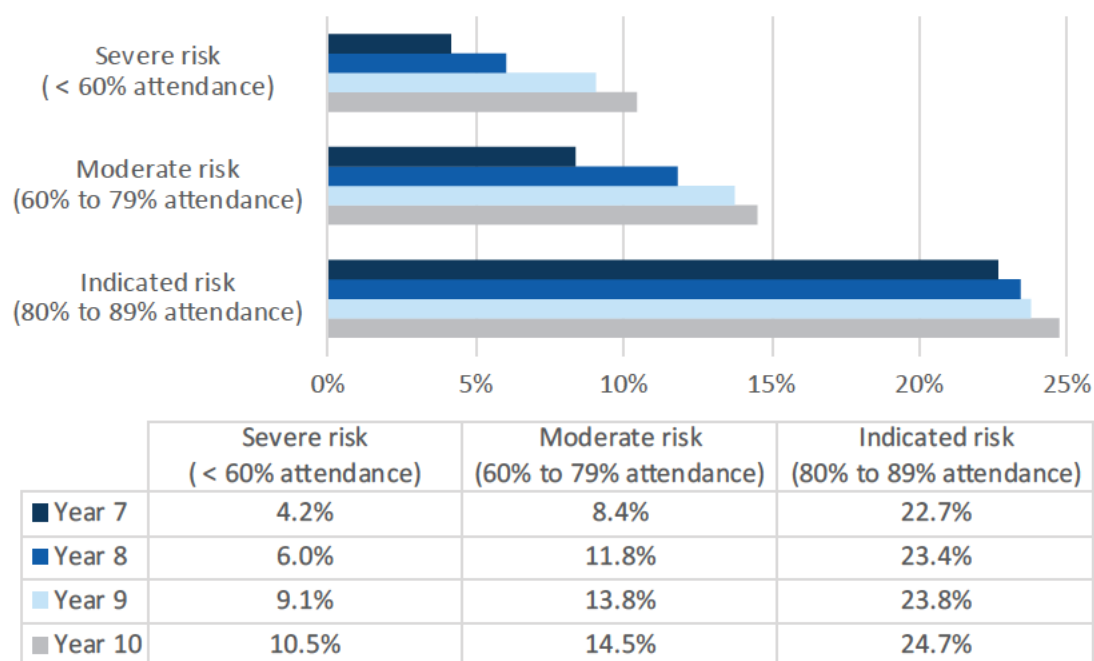Figure 6 shows the proportion of students in each category of educational risk increased over the four-year period. The percentage of students at severe educational risk increased from 6.7% in 2014 to 7.5% in 2017.

We also analysed the data to determine whether the percentage of students at educational risk had increased between Year 7 and Year 10 and the results for 2017 are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Percentage of students in Year 7 to Year 10 by category of educational risk in 2017

|	Severe risk (< 60% attendance)	Moderate risk (60% to 79% attendance)	Indicated risk (80% to 89% attendance)
■ Year 7	4.2%	8.4%	22.7%
■ Year 8	6.0%	11.8%	23.4%
■ Year 9	9.1%	13.8%	23.8%
■ Year 10	10.5%	14.5%	24.7%

Source: TAO, DoE

Figure 7 shows the number of students in each category of educational risk increased from Year 7 to Year 10. In particular:

- the percentage of students at severe educational risk more than doubled from 4.2% in Year 7 to 10.5% in Year 10

- the percentage of students at moderate educational risk increased significantly from 8.4% in Year 7 to 14.5% in Year 10

- the percentage of students at indicated educational risk remained relatively stable between Year 7 and Year 10

- 49.7% of students in Year 10 are at educational risk.

DoE advised 4 061 students were enrolled in Year 10 in 2017, meaning 2 018 students were at educational risk with 426 of those students at severe educational risk.

We also assessed whether there is a relationship between students at educational risk and ICSEA with the results shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Relationship between students at educational risk and ICSEA – 2017
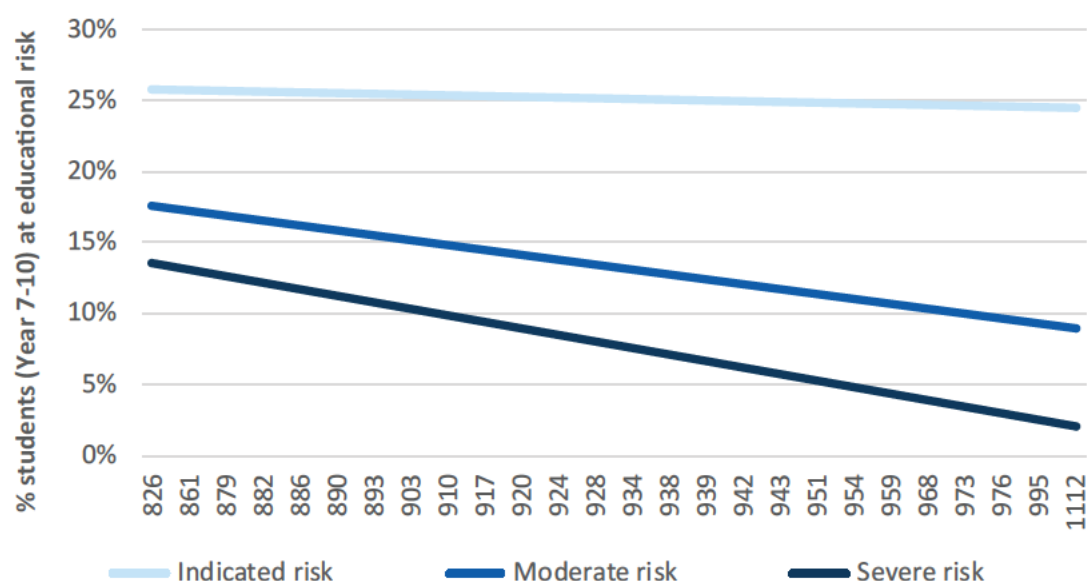
Source: TAO, DoE, ACARA

Figure 8 shows ICSEA has litle effect on the percentage of students at the lowest level of risk (indicated risk). However, the lower the ICSEA score, the greater the propensity for students to be at moderate or severe educational risk. Therefore, schools with lower ICSEA scores have the most students at educational risk.

Student engagement

School staff record information about student engagement in individual student records and monitor the engagement of students using reports such as attendance records and individual observations accessible through the ed*i* web reporting portal, but we found all of the reports about student engagement were student centric and they did not provide any performance data that we could analyse.

DoE undertakes an annual satisfaction survey across all schools, which includes questions designed to gain information about student engagement. Education Performance and Review (business unit within DoE) produces summary reports that staff use to compare results with the previous year and statewide. Learning Services (business unit within DoE) and school staff described the summary reports as broad indicators of student engagement. Student engagement is discussed further in Section 3.

We found no definition of performance measures, or targets, specific to student engagement. DoE has a structure of intervention to minimise the impacts of student disengagement, but we could not identify a source of information that detailed performance over time.

Section 1 Summary of findings

The average attendance rate of 88% for Tasmanian high schools has not substantively changed between 2014 and 2017. The attendance rate is consistently 2% lower than the Australian average meaning students were attending fewer days in Tasmania.

The attendance level for Tasmanian high schools dropped from 65% to 63% between 2014 and 2017 meaning fewer students are at or above a 90% attendance rate. This drop is comparable with the drop in the Australian average attendance level, which dropped from 69% to 67%.

In 2017, 91% of Tasmanian students began high school in Year 7 with an acceptable attendance rate but by Year 10 the rate had dropped to 85%. In comparison, across Australia 92% of students began high school in Year 7 with an acceptable attendance rate but by Year 10 it dropped to 88%.

Attendance rates are highest in Term 1 at the start of the school year in each Year group. Year 10 has the steepest rate of decline, from 87% in Term 1 of 2017 to 80% in Term 4. In Years 7 and 8, some of the additional absences in the winter months of Term 3 were recovered in Term 4, but not in Years 9 or 10.

A correlation was found between the ICSEA score and attendance rate and level for Tasmanian schools, meaning the higher an ICSEA score for a school, the higher the attendance rate and attendance level.

No correlation was found between attendance rate and level and school remoteness and there was only a limited correlation between attendance rate, level and school size.

The proportion of students in all categories of educational risk has progressively increased from 2014 to 2017 and the number of students in each category of educational risk progressively increased from Year 7 to Year 10 in 2017.

Schools with low ICSEA scores have the most students at educational risk. The lower the ICSEA score, the greater the propensity for students to be at moderate or severe educational risk.

Student engagement records are largely student centric and do not provide performance data that can be analysed or reported over time. While annual satisfaction surveys, and the summary reports produced therefrom are useful in identifying changes in levels of engagement, they do not define or report performance measures or targets specific to student engagement.

Recommendation

1. Consider analysing absence data for students in Years 7 to 10 according to educational risk categories - particularly in schools with a low ICSEA rating — with a view to establishing initiatives that make a positive difference for disadvantaged students.

2. IS STUDENT ATTENDANCE MANAGED EFFECTIVELY?

We assessed the effectiveness of DoE's management of student attendance by determining whether:

- student attendance is recorded, monitored, reported and analysed
- student attendance data is used to inform decisions and responses
- DoE involves parents, guardians and others in improving student attendance
- DoE supports and measures improvement in student attendance
- DoE has strategies for managing and improving student attendance.

2.1 Is student attendance recorded, monitored, reported and analysed?

Recording student attendance and absence

DoE has several integrated systems for recording and reporting data relating to student attendance and absence:

- SSS – student support system that captures information relevant to the support needs of each student
- Timetabler – application for high schools and colleges to associate students with teachers and classes
- DW3 – central database (data warehouse) for the majority of DoE data
- ed*i* – a web portal providing web accessible student and school information for principals, teachers and school administration staff through one entry point
- EduPoint – student administration system
- MatMan – mobile attendance manager (a modified version of EduPoint) enabling the recording of class attendance on touch-enabled mobile devices connected to the school's Wi-Fi.

The first time a student is enrolled at a Tasmanian Government school the student is allocated a unique student identifier (EdID)[10], which DoE systems use to track enrolments until the student completes Year 12 or 13. Students are also allocated a personal record in SSS.
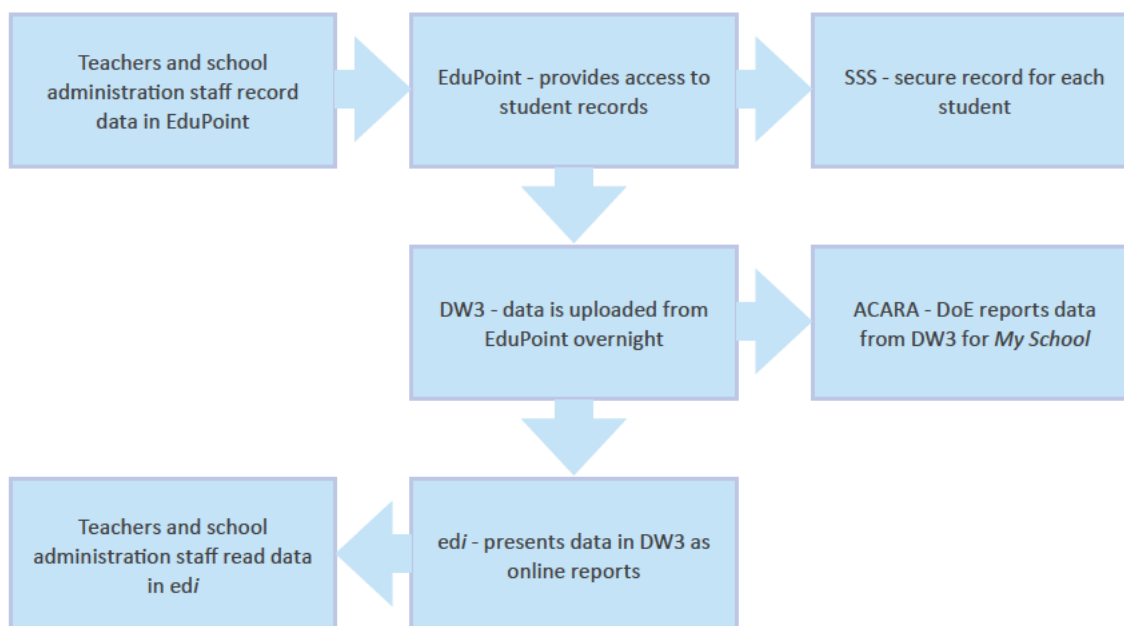
Timetabler is used to associate student identifiers with classes and corresponding teachers and is updated through an overnight upload of data to DW3.

Within ed*i*, teachers are provided with a dashboard view of reports that show historic information, such as the average attendance rate for the year-to-date. Dashboard reports allow users to compare performance over time or apply filters to view specific data, such as data for the whole school, Year group, class or other cohort, such as gender, or for an individual student.

---

10 DoE's regulations support the use of a unique student identifier (USI). The EdID is not the same as the USI used by registered training organisations (RTOs) including Tas TAFE. DoE, RTOs, the Office of the Tasmanian Assessments, Standards and Certification confirm valid reasons for DoE to issue an EdID rather than attempting to use a USI.

Figure 9 shows our understanding of the data flow in the DoE systems.

Figure 9: Data flow DoE systems

```
┌──────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Teachers and school  │ ──► │ EduPoint - provides  │ ──► │ SSS - secure record  │
│ administration staff │     │ access to student    │     │ for each student     │
│ record data in       │     │ records              │     │                      │
│ EduPoint             │     │                      │     │                      │
└──────────────────────┘     └──────────────────────┘     └──────────────────────┘
                                        │
                                        ▼
                             ┌──────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────┐
                             │ DW3 - data is        │ ──► │ ACARA - DoE reports  │
                             │ uploaded from        │     │ data from DW3 for    │
                             │ EduPoint overnight   │     │ My School            │
                             └──────────────────────┘     └──────────────────────┘
                                        │
                                        ▼
┌──────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Teachers and school  │ ◄── │ edi - presents data  │
│ administration staff │     │ in DW3 as online     │
│ read data in edi     │     │ reports              │
└──────────────────────┘     └──────────────────────┘
```

Source: TAO, DoE. Note: A full schematic of DoE systems is provided in Appendix 3.

The process for recording student attendance or absence involves teachers using EduPoint or MatMan to record whether a student is present or absent from a class. A student is present when they are in class or off campus on an excursion, attending a work experience/placement activity, or visiting another school as part of an endorsed school activity. A student is absent, whenever they are not attending their scheduled class, or another alternative authorised activity, even if they are on campus.

Access to student information is managed on a need-to-know basis. Most teachers can only access information in EduPoint for the students they are associated with through Timetabler.
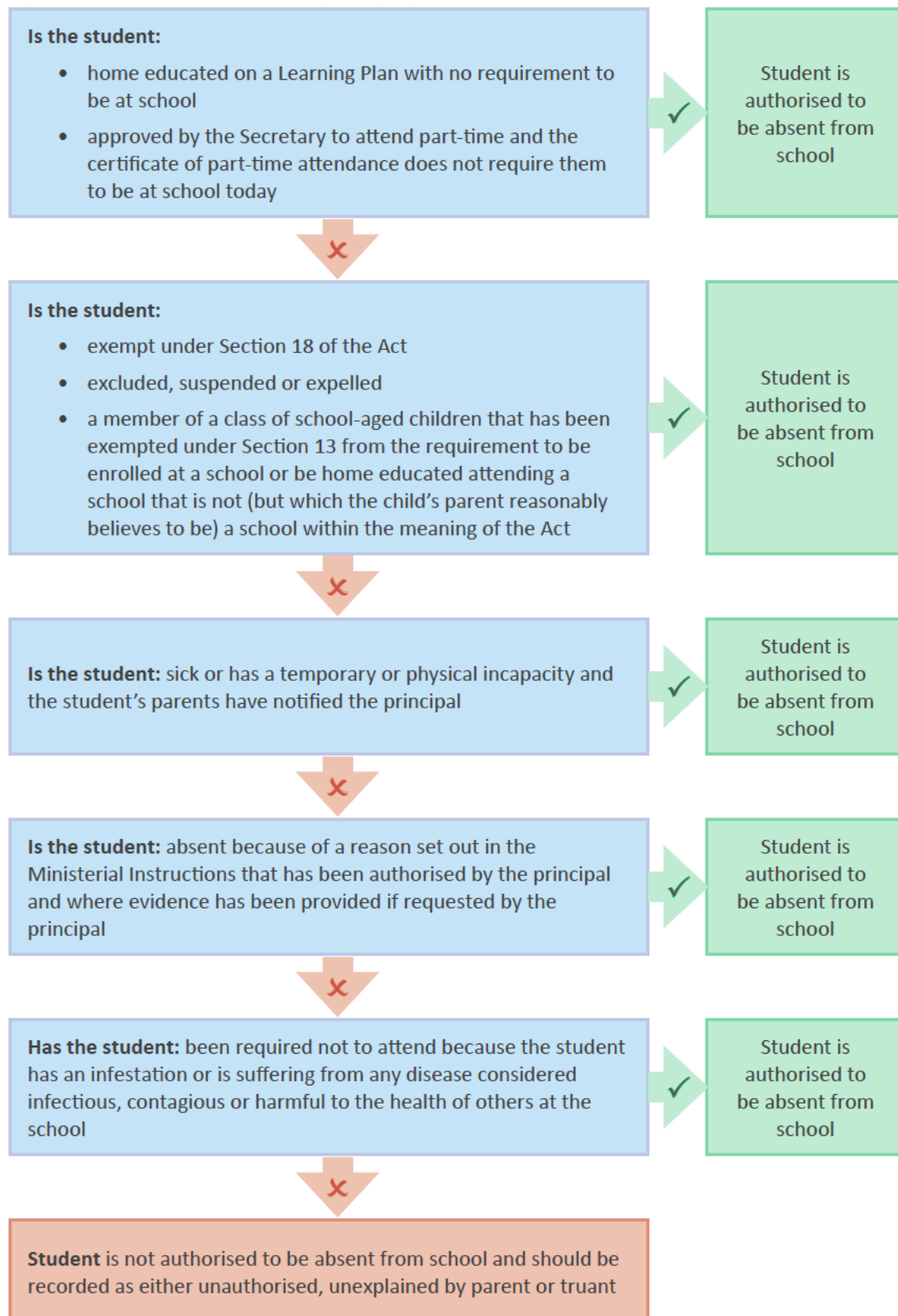
Where a student is absent without explanation the school sends a request to parents to provide an explanation. Most schools do this via text messaging. Once a response is received, an entry is made to the student record categorising the absence as authorised or unauthorised. Under the Act or Ministerial Instruction No 4 an absence is not authorised unless it relates to the following circumstances:

- sickness/incapacity
- medical, legal or related appointments
- natural disaster or extreme weather preventing your child from safely attending their enrolled school
- terminal illness of an immediate family member
- bereavement of a person your child had a close, significant or family relationship with
- having witnessed or been subjected to family violence
- being a participant or official at a recognised state, national or international event
- participating in a recognised learning experience
- an application for home education being received by the Registrar.

DoE attendance records have recorded attendance and absences by category since national reporting requirements were defined in 2014.

Figure 10 outlines the process described in the Attendance Policy and Process for school administration staff to categorise student absences for recording purposes.

Figure 10: Flowchart for recording category of student absence

Is the student:

- home educated on a Learning Plan with no requirement to be at school
- approved by the Secretary to attend part-time and the certificate of part-time attendance does not require them to be at school today

→ ✓ → Student is authorised to be absent from school

✗

Is the student:

- exempt under Section 18 of the Act
- excluded, suspended or expelled
- a member of a class of school-aged children that has been exempted under Section 13 from the requirement to be enrolled at a school or be home educated attending a school that is not (but which the child's parent reasonably believes to be) a school within the meaning of the Act

→ ✓ → Student is authorised to be absent from school

✗

Is the student: sick or has a temporary or physical incapacity and the student's parents have notified the principal

→ ✓ → Student is authorised to be absent from school

✗

Is the student: absent because of a reason set out in the Ministerial Instructions that has been authorised by the principal and where evidence has been provided if requested by the principal

→ ✓ → Student is authorised to be absent from school

✗

Has the student: been required not to attend because the student has an infestation or is suffering from any disease considered infectious, contagious or harmful to the health of others at the school

→ ✓ → Student is authorised to be absent from school

✗

Student is not authorised to be absent from school and should be recorded as either unauthorised, unexplained by parent or truant

Source: TAO illustration of Appendix F in DoE's Attendance Policy and Process

We assessed the integrity of data recorded in DoE systems to determine whether:

- adequate controls were in place to ensure data accuracy and completeness
- regular quality checks on data as it was uploaded to DW3 were undertaken.

We found DoE processes included data quality checks to ensure accuracy by identifying duplicate records and checking dates were valid school days. The data quality checks are run nightly when data is uploaded to DW3. Where an anomaly is identified, the system produces a data exception report for that date. One data exception report may list multiple issues, for example: Student X cannot be enrolled in the same subject in more than one school; Student Y has multiple active classes in the same subject.

Education Performance and Review scrutinises the data exception reports to identify any errors it can action centrally, such as dates that are not valid school days, before the reports are emailed to schools. The data exception reports provide schools with a description of the errors and how to correct the records.

We examined data exception reports generated over five separate dates during the 2017 school year and we were satisfied the:

- process had identified issues and exceptions
- exceptions were triaged and the data exception reports rated the severity of each issue or exception
- data exception reports had been actioned, as demonstrated by the results of our testing.

We also examined and tested student records at seven high schools. We found inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the absence records we examined, including:

- Five of the seven schools messaged parents of all 'students absent without an explanation' on the day of our visit. One school had only messaged 38 of the 47 parents of 'students absent without explanation' on the day of our visit — staff advised this was likely due to data entry errors. One school was not able to message parents on the day of our visit due to an unreliable messaging system.
- Two schools had an instance of a student recorded as absent (and parents notified) when the student had been present at an approved extra-curricular activity.
- Students approved for alternative learning programs remained enrolled in mainstream classes, which resulted in students being included in the absence count and unfavourably distorted the absence data.
- Categories of absence were not interpreted consistently. For example, at one school, student absences without a medical certificate for sick days after five in a year were categorised as 'Unauthorised' but the records did not identify whether the parents had provided an explanation (advised the student was sick). Another school used 'Explained' as well as 'Unauthorised'[11] to identify when parents had explained the student was ill but had not provided a medical certificate.

We noted DoE's internal auditor made similar findings in a 2017 report on student attendance in primary schools, which identified:

- a risk that absence categories may not reflect true absence profiles
- inconsistent approaches to recording advice from parents in relation to student absences.

Although DoE provides both documentation and self-directed online training modules about using EduPoint to record attendance and absence, staff advised they did not always have sufficient time or understanding of the system to benefit from the training.

Monitoring student attendance and absence

Information entered into EduPoint is available immediately to all relevant school staff. This real time information is used to monitor students' whereabouts during a school day, issue alerts if students fail to arrive in a class and to generate messages requesting parents to provide explanations for student absences.

---

11   Further detail on thresholds for unauthorised absences is included in Section 3.2.

EduPoint is one of several DoE systems that school staff can access from the ed*i* class dashboard. ed*i* also provides access to students' personal records which are stored in SSS.

School staff use information recorded in EduPoint and SSS as well as reports in ed*i* to monitor student attendance. Reports in ed*i* include average daily attendance to date and comparisons over time, which are discussed at staff meetings. Staff also use reports in ed*i* to monitor cohorts of students such as Year group or other descriptors, e.g. gender, and where necessary bring information to the attention of support staff or Learning Services.

Learning Services have access to additional reports in ed*i* that allow them to monitor attendance at a school level. This information is used to prioritise allocation of resources between schools, such as social worker hours. DoE executive is informed about student attendance by reports from Learning Services.

The processes for managing unauthorised absences are outlined in DoE's Attendance Policy and Process. For example, when a student accumulates a total of five, 10 or 15 days of absence (not necessarily consecutive), SSS generates an email to the principal advising that an absence threshold has been breached and adds an alert to the 'To Do' lists that school support staff and principals see in their everyday view of SSS. The Attendance Policy and Process states principals may:

- send a pro-forma letter to the student's parents requesting they contact the school to discuss issues affecting the student's attendance

- choose not to send a letter if circumstances warrant it — whenever this option is chosen, the reason must be recorded in the student's contact log.

During our school visits we observed evidence of letters sent to parents.

Learning Services advised that where absences exceed 20 days there is an escalation of action that involves a senior social worker, operations manager and principal to work collaboratively on a resolution. In addition, schools can refer continued, unexplained non-attendance to the Registrar who may initiate the compulsory conciliation conference process whereby students, parents and school principals can discuss and agree on how best to support a students' attendance.

Reporting student attendance and absence

DoE reports the data collected in DW3 to ACARA twice a year in Terms 1 and 3 in compliance with the national reporting requirements to populate the *My School* website.

DoE demonstrated that a range of reports with attendance information can be generated by ed*i*. We sighted no other reporting mechanisms other than ed*i*. No reports sighted contained attendance performance information such as targets.

In 2018, DoE commenced developing a business intelligence system, called the Annual School Performance Information and Review of Education (ASPIRE),[12] to gather and report attendance information. ASPIRE will provide five-year performance trends, comparing like schools and state and national benchmarks, including attendance levels for each school.

 However, we determined the system:

- is a consolidation of historic information from the *My School* website and DoE satisfaction surveys

- does not disaggregate the attendance level by each Year group

- does not include improvement targets.

Individual student attendance is reported via a student's end-of-year report.

We reviewed DoE's annual reports and found only one figure reported for attendance, which represented average daily attendance for the whole school. For District schools this may cover Prep to Year 12. However, we acknowledge that DoE provides data to ACARA, which includes both attendance rates and levels for each Year group.

---

12   ASPIRE is a performance report developed by DoE using the Power BI software platform and is designed to be a high-level entry point to detailed reports in other DoE systems including ed*i*. Currently only a prototype, DoE intends ASPIRE to support school improvement planning as part of an inquiry cycle.

Analysing student attendance and absence

In accordance with the Attendance Policy and Process, schools collect and record explanations for students' absences from schools. Although absence information is made available to DoE executive and management, we found no evidence it was reviewed on a regular or systematic basis.

We examined the number of absences recorded in each of the categories used to record attendance and the results for 2017 are shown below in Figure 11. The categories are defined as:

- 'Explained', which means parents have provided an explanation for the absence
- 'Unexplained', which means parents have not provided any reason for the absence
- 'Unauthorised', which means an absence is in contravention of the Act or Ministerial Instruction No.4, whether or not an explanation has been provided
- 'Discipline', which means a student is absent as a result of a disciplinary process
- 'Truant', which means a student is chronically absent and fails to attend school.

Figure 11: Percentage of absences by reason in schools for the 2017 school year
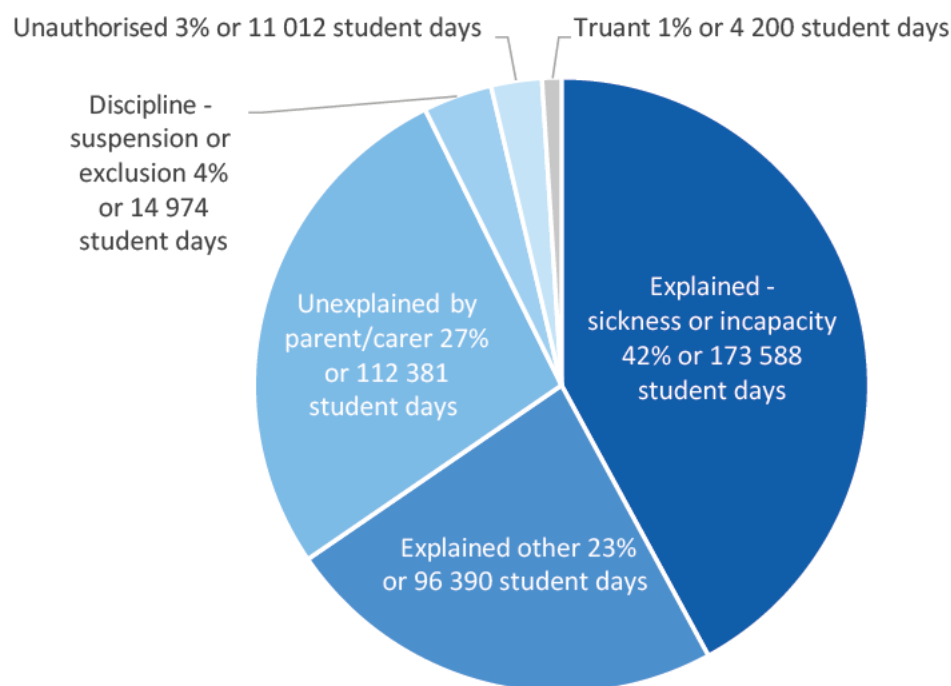
Source: TAO, DoE.

Figure 11 shows:

- explained absences totalled 65% or 269 978 student days
- 27% or 112 381 student days of absences were unexplained
- a very small percentage of students were absent without authorisation, truant or subject to discipline, suspension or exclusion.

We reviewed absence information for the period 2014 to 2017 to determine whether any significant changes had occurred in the number of student days absent in each category of absence or by school year and noted little change over the four years.

2.2 Is student attendance data used to inform decisions and responses?

Decisions and responses to data are most effective and efficient when considered in a systematic manner, integrated into strategy, performance measurement and risk management. Effective decision making requires performance data.

DoE collects information on attendance and absence but we found no evidence that this data is used to monitor trends or establish improvement targets for students at highest educational risk.

As shown in Section 1, analysing absences according to educational risk categories may provide meaningful insights into how students are becoming increasingly at risk of failing school between Year 7 and Year 10 and may assist in focusing strategies to address non-attendance.

School staff described the process and provided reports used to identify, monitor, report and analyse student attendance. We noted the approach is focused mainly on individual students. Student information, especially that relating to personal circumstances, is sensitive and therefore is stored securely in student records that do not lend themselves to producing performance data.

The Attendance Policy and Process requires principals to try to resolve a student's non-attendance within the school resources and budget before requesting additional assistance.[13] This process

---

13 DoE Attendance Policy and Process, Section 4.4 Roles and Responsibilities states a principal, or principal's delegate, must ensure there have been efforts to resolve a student's non-attendance, including discussion with the school social worker or school psychologist.

is outlined in Section 2.1 and shows student attendance and absence data informs the decision as to further actions. Under the Act, the process is focused on engaging parents and students in addressing non-attendance issues and creating a clear path towards conciliation conferences if needed.

If additional assistance is required, requests are made to Learning Services whose staff include social workers deployed in schools. In response, Learning Services may:

- allocate additional social worker hours to a school — as well as counselling students, social workers attend regular meetings with school support staff to ensure Learning Services is kept up-to-date with the issues affecting each school

- facilitate additional counselling or specialist services such as speech therapists or psychologists

- communicate with other agencies such as child health services, police and youth justice services or non-government welfare agencies.

We observed Learning Services use of a paper-based data wall to capture and monitor school needs and manage the prioritisation of Learning Services resources to meet those needs. The data wall comprises folders for each school with markers showing the resources needed to address attendance issues. The paper-based system provides an effective way to illustrate up-to-date situations at each of the schools according to the professional judgement of Learning Services staff.

The process used by Learning Services to address attendance issues is one of escalation to achieve resolution to chronic non-attendance. This process may stop at any time where the principal and social worker consider attendance has returned to an acceptable level. However, acceptable level is not defined and there are no documented steps to follow in order to cease the escalation process.

Given the importance of student attendance we expected to find evidence of risk assessments that identified factors contributing to absences, e.g. student disengagement, poor infrastructure, peer pressure, bullying, family circumstances. We also expected to find evidence of risk mitigation strategies that would address causes and a measurement system to track improvements in performance. While DoE had implemented risk management policies and processes, we found there was a gap in agency information about risks relating to attendance including:

- strategic risks impacted by deteriorating attendance:
  - failure to deliver education to students
  - reputational risk of public education
  - long-term cost to economy, health, social services
- operational risks:
  - incorrect recording of attendance data
  - lack of monitoring of student attendance.

Section 2.2 Summary of findings

The process to identify, monitor, report and analyse student attendance is mainly focused on individual students with an intervention escalation process adopted to resolve attendance issues of increasing concern. In examining the process, no definition of what constitutes acceptable attendance was stated and there were no documented steps to follow to cease the escalation process.

DoE collects information on attendance and absence but no evidence was found to show that this data is used to effectively monitor trends or establish improvement targets for students at highest educational risk.

The data shows increasing levels of student risk from Years 7 to 10 and for schools with a low ICSEA score. While DoE had implemented risk management policies and processes, there was limited agency information about risks relating to attendance at both a strategic and operational level.

Recommendations

6. Define performance measures and targets for student attendance.

7. Monitor trends and establish improvement targets for students at highest educational risk.

8. Identify and manage risks to student attendance for Years 7 to 10.

2.3 Does DoE involve parents and others in improving student attendance?

Parents

The Act articulates the role parents have in their child's education including a responsibility to ensure their child receives an education. The government also has a responsibility to support parents in ensuring they meet their responsibilities under the Act.

Subject to some exemption and exclusions, the Act places requirements on parents to enrol their child in school and to ensure their child attends school each school day.

The Attendance Policy and Process, Ministerial Instructions and Secretary Instructions also impose obligations on parents in respect of student non-attendance. These include:

- responding to text messages to explain student non-attendance at school
- responding to correspondence relating to student non-attendance at school
- attendance at compulsory conciliation conferences whereby students, parents and school principals can discuss and agree on how best to support students' attendance.

Although the responsibilities should improve student attendance, we were advised of barriers to achieving this objective, including:

- reduced parental engagement in their child's education as the child progresses through school
- parents abdicating their responsibility for their child's learning because they are of the view that this is entirely the role of the education system
- parents not responding to communication made by a school in respect of their child's attendance and absence issues
- parents are unable or unwilling to become engaged in their child's education.

Schools attempt to address these barriers by inviting greater parental engagement but often the students with attendance issues are also experiencing difficult family circumstances and additional contact from schools may not be helpful. In some instances, cultural change or a shift in community attitudes to parental involvement in high schools is required. We found DoE had initiated programs to increase access, participation and engagement of parents from pregnancy and through early childhood in preparation for student engagement. For example, information provided by Child and Family Centres, and Early Years programs operating in primary schools.

We were advised home group teachers are expected to familiarise themselves with a student's circumstances and are the first point-of-call for communication with parents concerning a student's

absence. If a home group teacher is unable to resolve an issue the home group teacher may seek assistance from the Year group coordinator or other school support staff. This may involve an interview with the parents to gain further insight into the reason for absences.

Schools also provide consistent and regular reminders to parents about the value of regular attendance including reporting attendance in the student's end-of-year report. Increased use of social media such as Facebook, newsletters and parent evenings are also used to reinforce the message to parents.

Further commentary on the relationship between schools and parents is included in Section 3 of this Report.

Community and stakeholders

In addition to parents and DoE, the community can also play an active role in ensuring students attend and engage in their education.

DoE's mission includes every child and young person being provided with the potential to positively contribute to the community and it is a key driver of the 'Community Partnerships' initiative, the objectives of which are to:

- effectively communicate the value of public education and lifelong learning as key to improving the social and economic wellbeing of Tasmanians

- support parents and carers as key partners and stakeholders in a child's education

- develop meaningful partnerships with community, business and industry to collectively achieve positive outcomes for all Tasmanians

- preserve and make available Tasmania's documentary heritage to inform current and future generations.

DoE has also pursued other initiatives such as:

- initiating relationships with a range of community organisations including those involving Fairer World, Quit program, The Smith Family and Beacon Foundation

- the School Health Nurse Program to provide prevention, early detection and health promotion to schools, families and communities

- the Safe Homes Safe Families whole of government action plan.

During our school visits we obtained evidence of some community involvement, but there was no formal reporting as to the effectiveness of these activities in improving attendance and engagement.

Our review of school improvement plans for the schools we visited, identified five out of seven schools had included statements about their school community. However, the quality and detail provided varied considerably between the schools.

Section 2.3 Summary of findings

The Act articulates the role parents have in their child's education including a responsibility to ensure their child receives an education. The government also has a responsibility to support parents in ensuring they meet their responsibilities under the Act.

DoE recognises the value of community engagement in improving student attendance and engagement. DoE's 'Community Partnerships' initiative supports parents as key stakeholders in a child's education. During school visits evidence of some community involvement was obtained but no formal reporting was identified that showed the effectiveness of efforts to engage parents to improve attendance or engagement.

It was identified that little information was documented in school improvement plans about involving parents in improving attendance (or engagement).

Recommendation

9. Consider providing further clarity to schools regarding the inclusion of targets in school improvement plans for improved parent, community and stakeholder engagement.

2.4. Does DoE support and measure improvement in student attendance?

We expected to see performance measures established with targets for attendance rates and attendance levels. We found that DoE reports:

- annual attendance data to ACARA in compliance with national requirements
- annual average daily attendance rate[14] for each school on its website in Annual Key Datasets rather than in its annual reports
- attendance targets in the Budget papers.

The 2014-2017 Strategic Plan included a performance target for attendance rates set at 91% for all years of school (Prep to 10). However, this target was not disaggregated for Years 7 to 10 potentially masking the decline in attendance.

The 2018-2021 Strategic Plan did not identify targets for attendance and targets are not reported in DoE annual reports.

DoE provided a high level implementation plan for a 2017-18 budget initiative to review and revise the school improvement framework. Outcomes of the framework include transparent and consistent measures of each school's performance. However, we found no evidence that the review would specifically identify performance targets or measures for student attendance.

Schools are required to develop a school improvement plan that includes their own measures of improvement. While we acknowledge the value of devolution of accountability to schools, we consider an agency statement on performance targets is essential to drive and achieve consistent outcomes across all schools.

Section 2.4 Summary of findings

DoE provided a high level implementation plan for a 2017-18 budget initiative to review and revise the school improvement framework. Outcomes of the framework included transparent and consistent measures of each school's performance. However, there was no evidence that the review would specifically identify performance targets or measures for student attendance.

Although DoE reports attendance rates, the performance targets or measures for high school attendance were not identified in any DoE performance reports.

Recommendations

10. Complete the implementation of the initiative to review and revise the school improvement framework.

11. Include development of performance targets and measures as part of the revision of the school improvement framework.

12. Include targets and measures for attendance rates and levels for Years 7 to 10 for Tasmania in school improvement plans.

---

14 Annual Average daily attendance rate (proportion of students present).

2.5 Does DoE have strategies for managing and improving student attendance?

DoE strategic and business unit plans

For the period of this audit, DoE's 2014-2017 Strategic Plan was in place until it was updated by the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan in October 2017. The new strategic plan, as presented in Appendix 4, represents DoE's one-page guiding framework for the improvement of educational outcomes for 2018 to 2021. We understand the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan was deliberately kept brief with the intent that each school would prepare an annual school improvement plan.

We also reviewed the terms of reference for DoE's Strategic Plan Implementation Steering Committee and examined the following documents:

- 2018-2021 Strategic Plan implementation – approach to improvement
- 2018-2021 Strategic Plan implementation action plan – October 2017
- 2018-2021 Child and Wellbeing Strategy

The strategies described in the documents include the following four goals:

- Early Learning
- Wellbeing
- Literacy and Numeracy
- Access, Participation and Engagement.

We found some general references to goals and a need to develop targets and measures but there were none specifically related to attendance.

We also examined DoE's 2017-2018 business unit plans and also found no specific strategies, objectives, goals or targets to improve student attendance. We identified that two key business units involved with schools: Education Performance and Review, and Learning Services, had not completed business unit plans as they were focused on work relating to the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan.

School improvement planning

Under the 2014-2017 Strategic Plan, schools were required to produce both strategic plans and school improvement plans. Under the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan, schools are no longer required to produce their own strategic plans but are still required to prepare an annual school improvement plan.

DoE advised schools use the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT)[15] as a guide to planning. The NSIT was endorsed by the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood in December 2012 and was founded on an explicit improvement agenda that requires the school leadership team to establish and drive a strong improvement agenda for the school, grounded in evidence from research and practice and expressed in terms of improvements in measurable student outcomes. Included in this improvement agenda is consideration of the extent to which the school communicates clearly that it expects all students to learn successfully and has high expectations for student attendance, engagement and outcomes.

Schools were provided with a template to facilitate the preparation of their school improvement plan for 2018. Schools are required to identify the following components in school improvement plans:

- priorities
- analysis of data and evidence
- objectives (outcome)
- strategies
- evaluation measures.

---

15 NSIT was developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations based on a series of national consultations conducted in 2012.

DoE required each school to identify two or three priorities for improvements to support the goals articulated in the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan, when developing their school improvement plans.

We expected all schools to include targets for attendance in their school improvement plans.

Table 1 shows information published on the *My School* website about attendance in 2017 for the schools we visited and whether attendance targets, rates or levels, were included in each school's improvement plan for 2018.

Table 1: 2017 attendance rates and levels in schools visited with attendance targets for 2018

High school	2017 attendance rate (%)[16]	2017 attendance level (%)[17]	Attendance targets for 2018 in school improvement plans	
			Rate	Level
Burnie	88	62	✓ (90%)	✗
Clarence	87	59	✓ (88%)	✗
Deloraine	88	66	✗	✗
Kingston	87	59	✓ (88%)	✗
New Norfolk	80	43	✓ (80%)	✗
Prospect	88	66	✗	✗
St Mary's	87	61	✗	✗
Average	**86**	**59**		

Source: TAO, ACARA. Note: Percentages have been rounded to nearest whole number. A ✓ indicates a rate or level was included in the school improvement plan while a ✗ indicates an absence in the school improvement plan.

None of the school improvement plans we examined included targets to improve attendance levels. Attendance levels identify the percentage of students not attending school regularly, which is different information to that provided by attendance rates.

Section 2.5 Summary of findings

DoE's 2018-2021 Strategic Plan was deliberately kept at a high level to act as a reference document with the intent that each school would prepare its own annual school improvement plan.

Targets for student attendance were not consistently included in school improvement plans.

ASPIRE is designed to enhance the monitoring and reporting of data for each school and will include attendance levels, but:

- no targets for attendance levels in school improvement plans were identified
- information was not disaggregated by Year group.

Recommendation

13. Continue to develop ASPIRE focusing on further detail and setting targets for improved attendance in Years 7 to 10.

---

16 TAO averaged attendance rates reported on the My School website for Semester 1 and Term 3 in 2017.

17 TAO averaged attendance levels reported on the My School website for Semester 1 and Term 3 in 2017.

3. IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MANAGED EFFECTIVELY?

We assessed the effectiveness of DoE's management of student engagement by determining whether:

- student engagement is recorded, monitored, reported and analysed
- student engagement data is used to inform decisions and responses
- DoE involves parents, guardians and others in improving student engagement
- DoE supports and measures improvement in student engagement
- DoE has strategies for managing and improving student engagement.

3.1 Is student engagement recorded, monitored, reported and analysed?

The aim of DoE's Engagement and Retention Policy is to ensure students can progress in learning programs that are responsive to their needs and aspirations within an environment that is safe and inclusive.

The policy reinforces the expectation that staff working with students will ensure optimal levels of engagement, retention and educational attainment. DoE's Engagement and Retention Policy includes specific requirements for each stakeholder as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Requirements for stakeholders

Stakeholder	Requirements
Secretary and deputy secretaries	Implement the policy at a state level. Initiate/issue directives and guidelines to schools consistent with the policy.
Professional Learning Institute	Facilitate professional learning programs that support and enable implementation of the policy.
Educational Performance Services	Deliver timely and relevant data. Support principals and staff in the interpretation and use of data. Support schools to meet accountability and reporting requirements.
Curriculum Services	Provide curriculum support for schools and colleges, including differentiation and student engagement materials. Provide support for child and family centres, schools and colleges to engage families in partnerships that maximise attendance, participation, engagement and attainment.
General managers and managers	Ensure school leaders have timely and appropriate opportunities and support from Learning Services to embed the policy and strategies.

Stakeholder	Requirements
Child and Family Centre leaders and school and college principals, supported by their principal network leaders	Provide resources, structures, processes, programs to implement policy. Ensure all staff have timely and appropriate professional learning opportunities to enact the policy. Ensure delivery of high quality educational programs and effective pedagogies that challenge, stimulate and engage students. Ensure processes, roles and responsibilities are in place to review data, respond to student needs and collaboratively develop learning plans. Work with students and their families to resolve issues or change attitudes causing non-attendance. Provide meaningful and ongoing opportunities for families to engage in their child's education, including at key transition points. Ensure each Year 10 student is supported to transition to Years 11 and 12. Facilitate school community conversations affirming the importance of all students attaining Year 12 or equivalent.
Educators	Co-construct high quality, relevant educational programs that challenge and engage students, implementing learning plans as required. Create a learning environment based on respectful relationships that values student voice, diversity and excellence. Use data to support every student to maximise their capacity to engage with and continue their learning. Positively influence students to aspire to attain Year 12 or equivalent.
Professional support teams	Provide timely and personalised interventions to support the delivery of high quality education programs.
Families	Consider participating in early years learning program opportunities.

Source: DoE's Student Engagement and Retention Policy

In relation to recording, monitoring, reporting and analysing student engagement, Table 2 shows the following specific requirements:

- Education Performance and Review - deliver timely and relevant data, support principals and staff in the interpretation and use of data and support schools to meet accountability and reporting requirements

- Child and Family Centre leaders and school and college principals, supported by their principal network leaders - ensure processes, roles and responsibilities are in place to review data, respond to student needs and collaboratively develop learning plans

- Educators - use data to support every student to maximise their capacity to engage with and continue their learning.

In addition to the above requirements, DoE's Student Engagement Procedures includes a section on data collection:

Schools are to make use of data from a range of sources, that gives an indication of students' level of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement and to identify early signs of disengagement. All staff are to use online tools, such as SSS and ed*i* to record, access and analyse student data to inform their own practice and refer students for support as needed.

School staff record engagement information in SSS records and monitor student engagement using reports accessible through ed*i*. However, we found these records student centric and that they did not provide performance data or reports for any of the alternative learning programs.

One source of data used to access and analyse information about student engagement is DoE's annual satisfaction survey, which is undertaken for all schools. Questions for the survey were developed nationally, as a set of questions that Education Ministers agreed all Australian schools would collect annually. Over the past two years, Education Performance and Review has added additional questions in an effort to gain more detailed information about student engagement.

Education Performance and Review collates responses to the surveys and provides summary reports to schools. The summary reports allow staff to compare results with the previous year and all schools across the state. Education Performance and Review also provide a statewide summary report to the DoE executive, which is based on the results from all schools, Kinder to Year 12, but does not disaggregate data for Years 7 to 10.[18]

School staff and Learning Services use the summary reports as broad indicators of student engagement and described them as useful references for preparing school improvement plans. We discuss DoE's satisfaction survey further in Section 3.4.

DoE's Student Engagement Procedures also outline four levels of action designed to improve student engagement as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Engagement actions in DoE's Student Engagement Procedures

Tier	Characteristics	Actions
1	Universal, inclusive and the foundation for engagement of all students. Include programs, processes and systems implemented by a school to maximise the engagement of every student in every class, including those who might otherwise passively disengage.	Everyday practice in the classroom, including processes and programs that enable educators to work collaboratively with families to maximise each student's attendance, participation, engagement and retention.
2	Targeted, responsive interventions providing extra support in the academic, social or emotional domains in response to students' needs informed by data and designed to maintain engagement in students at risk of disengaging.	Interventions occur in the school and may apply to any student from time to time based on need. Partnering with families to enhance learning and provide extra support at times of transition between schools and between phases of schooling as needed, including Year 6 to 7, and Year 10 to 11. Preventative measures designed to help students avoid chronic disengagement.

---

18 DoE satisfaction surveys are anonymous with resultant reports providing agreement ratings representing responses from the whole school and do not disaggregate results by Year groups.

Tier	Characteristics	Actions
3	School managed re-engagement programs designed to enable students who have become disconnected, to re-engage with mainstream schooling. Involves working through a personalised learning plan process with students and their families to support transition to a positive perception of the value of school and of their capacity to learn and benefit from it.	Tiers 3 and 4 include re-engagement initiatives such as support staff encouraging one-to-one meetings with students and their families that may be formalised, or remain ad hoc based on student needs. Students requiring Tier 3 and 4 programs generally have complex issues inhibiting them from engaging in mainstream schooling (e.g. trauma, youth justice, mental health, family violence, homelessness) and have missed most of their secondary schooling and do not see themselves ever returning to a mainstream high school.
4	Re-engagement programs managed by Learning Services and located in the community designed to reframe students' perceptions of learning, renegotiate its value to them and re-establish productive working relationships.	Tier 4 Programs: • are a mix of offline and online work designed to re-engage students by initiating regular communication with a mentor (teacher) and face-to-face work • deliver a set of units to provide every possible support or pathway to re-engagement with school, as well as looking at further education or work • have transition back to mainstream school as an end goal, but that is not always possible for all students • have capacity for 51 students including two groups of 10 who are unable to work with any others.

Source: DoE.

Staff at Learning Services advised the Tier 4 programs were always at capacity with DoE advising that over the last three years numbers have ranged from 126 in 2016 to 104 in 2017. We found no evidence of requirements or systems to report the performance of alternative learning programs.

DoE and schools advised the following factors affect their ability to effectively measure engagement:

- issues affecting students' engagement are complex, multi-variant and multi-faceted, for example a student may:
  - be engaged in one subject and not in another
  - start a school day engaged in lessons but disengage in response to communication from peers or from home
- the easiest forms of disengagement to identify and address arise from students finding the work too difficult or too simple. In these instances, the issue is usually resolved by the teacher or by a change in class (if possible)
- more often, significant and/or long-term disengagement occurs in conjunction with attendance issues.

Section 3.1 Summary of findings

DoE has an Engagement and Retention Policy and Student Engagement Procedures that aim to:

- clarify the expectation that all staff working with children and young people from the early years to Year 12 take responsibility for ensuring optimal levels of engagement, retention and educational attainment
- provide a consistent approach to the provisions made by schools to engage their students, including the establishment, implementation and monitoring of re-engagement programs.

It was identified that:

- School staff record engagement information in student support system (SSS) records and monitor student engagement using reports accessible through ed*i*, however, these records were student centric.
- DoE has established four levels of programs designed to address problems with student engagement.
- DoE undertakes an annual satisfaction survey across all schools and Education Performance and Review collates responses and provides summary reports to schools. The summary reports allow staff to compare results with the previous year and permits a statewide comparison. The satisfaction survey is also used for school improvement planning.
- Education Performance and Review provide a statewide summary report to the DoE executive, which is based on the results from all schools, Kinder to Year 12, but the report does not disaggregate data for Years 7 to 10.

However, no definition of performance measures, or targets, specific to student engagement and no evidence of requirements or systems to report the performance of alternative learning programs were found.

DoE has a structure of intervention to minimise the impacts of student disengagement, however, no source of information that detailed the benefits over time could be found.

Recommendations

14. Develop a system to identify signs of disengagement and tools to be used by schools for structured analysis of information.

15. Consider undertaking further work to clarify and agree on the information to be recorded, reported and monitored regarding student engagement and establishing improvement targets.

16. Undertake a benefits analysis to determine the level of success of interventions and determine where best to invest funds using measurable performance targets.

3.2 Is student engagement data used to inform decisions and responses?

As noted above in Section 3.1,

- DoE undertakes an annual satisfaction survey across all schools and Education Performance and Review collates responses and provides summary reports to schools. The summary reports allow staff to compare results with the previous year and statewide, which is used in school improvement planning.

- Education Performance and Review also provide a statewide summary report to the DoE executive, which is based on the results from all schools, Kinder to Year 12, but does not disaggregate data for Years 7 to 10.

Whilst acknowledging information from the annual satisfaction surveys is used to assist in decision making, there is an absence of engagement performance data that is regularly reported and analysed to better inform decision making.

Nevertheless, the lack of performance data does not mean that decisions are not being made to improve engagement. Table 3 lists actions outlined in DoE's Student Engagement Procedures to respond to student needs to improve engagement.

We observed that the everyday practice in classrooms includes teachers observing students' engagement and identifying shortfalls in attendance, participation or the completion of school work. These observations inform decisions and responses that teachers develop as a part of their everyday lesson planning. Staff at Learning Services and the schools explained that teachers discuss their observations in regular staff meetings, with peers and school support workers and where required, these discussions inform the need for additional decisions and responses.

DoE's Student Engagement Procedures outline the need for responses to students needs to be 'informed by data'. Learning Services and school staff explained that most often the information required to inform decisions to improve engagement was relevant to individual students and is therefore stored securely in student centric records that do not lend themselves to producing performance data.

Section 3.2 Summary of findings

Whilst acknowledging information from the annual satisfaction surveys is used to assist in decision making, there is an absence of engagement performance data being regularly reported and analysed to better inform decision making. However, the lack of performance data does not mean that decisions are not being made to improve engagement.

Recommendation

17. Consider how information regarding student engagement can be monitored and analysed to better support DoE and school decisions and responses.

3.3 Does DoE involve parents and others in improving student engagement?

DoE recognises the importance of involving parents through its Engagement and Retention Policy and Student Engagement Procedures, which state that student engagement, retention and educational attainment will be maximised by educators working:

- collaboratively with families in an ongoing partnership from birth to Year 12
- with students and their families to resolve issues or change attitudes that are causing non-attendance.

Student Engagement Procedures recognise that schools, in partnership with families, have responsibility for the engagement of students so that they reach their full potential. Table 3 of this Report notes that everyday practice in classrooms include processes and programs that enable educators to work collaboratively with families to maximise each student's attendance, participation, engagement and retention.

We identified that DoE provides several programs that aim to work with families to improve student engagement and educational attainment, including:

- Launching into Learning is one of the Early Years programs that aims to get parents engaged in students learning prior to Kindergarten. It provides resources to schools to develop and lead initiatives with families, focus on the needs of their community and make connections with other groups, services and agencies in the area.

- Learning in Families Together is an initiative that aims to build parental confidence and skills to support each child's literacy and numeracy learnings at home. The program aims to encourage collaboration between home, school and the community. The Family Partnerships Model is an innovative evidence-based program used to facilitate and strengthen partnerships between school staff and families.

We also observed that Home Group teachers provide pastoral care and are responsible for getting to know individual students and their circumstances. We were shown records of Home Group teachers' attempts to contact parents. However, results were dependent on parents' availability and willingness to participate.

DoE's website highlights the importance of parents understanding how their child is progressing with learning and states that:

- Parents will be updated on their child's progress through a range of communications including written reports and parent/teacher meetings. Some schools also have meetings between the teacher, parent(s) and student.

- Parent/teacher meetings are an opportunity to meet their child's teacher(s). Parents can discuss the information provided in their child's report and become more involved in their child's learning.

As discussed in Section 2.3, schools provide regular reminders to parents about the value of regular communication. The increased use of social media, notices on school websites, school newsletters and invitations to parent evenings are also used to engage with parents.

DoE also provides a *Community and Engagement* web page that schools circulate in print that encourages parents to get involved and engaged in their child's education.

Section 3.3 Summary of findings

The Act, the Engagement and Retention Policy and the Student Engagement Procedures all recognise the need for collaboration between parents and educators for student engagement.

DoE involves parents and others in improving student engagement by providing information to encourage communication between parents, teachers and students on the DoE website, in school newsletters, via social media and through the provision of various family support programs.

3.4 Does DoE support and measure improvement in student engagement?

As noted in Section 3.1, we found no definition of performance measures, or targets, specific to student engagement.

However, DoE has developed the Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2021, which outlines six domains that contribute to wellbeing, with attending and engaging in education forming part of the learning domain. DoE intends to develop and embed measures to capture wellbeing in school planning in 2020.

In the absence of performance data that we could test, we examined the results of the annual DoE satisfaction surveys of students, parents and teachers.

DoE satisfaction surveys

DoE undertakes annual satisfaction surveys across all schools. DoE advised the questions for the survey were developed nationally, as a set of questions that Education Ministers agreed all Australian schools would collect annually. Over the past two years Education Performance and Review has added additional questions in an effort to gain more detailed information about student engagement.

School staff and Learning Services describes the satisfaction surveys as useful in identifying changes in levels of engagement, to which schools can then refer when preparing their school improvement plans.

Education Performance and Review collates the responses of the satisfaction surveys and provides summary reports to schools using an agreement rating out of 10, where 10 would indicate complete satisfaction or agreement with a question. Schools and Learning Services use the summary reports as broad indicators of student engagement.

We examined response rates to student surveys and found the number of responses received from:

- Year 7 increased by 37%, from 1 180 in 2014, to 1 616 in 2017
- Year 8 increased by 19%, from 1 244 in 2014 to 1 482 in 2017
- Year 9 increased by 19% over the period, from 1 210 in 2016 to 1 436 in 2017
- Year 10 students decreased by 7%, from 1 150 in 2014 to 1 069 in 2017.

The number of responses received from:

- parents (whose eldest child was in Year 7 to 10) increased by 20%, from 958 in 2014 to 1 149 in 2017
- staff (who taught Years 7 to 10) decreased overall by 17%, from 1 043 in 2014 to 866 in 2017.

We identified 14 questions that were the same from 2014 to 2017, as listed below:

1. My teachers expect me to do my best
2. My teachers provide me with useful feedback about my school work
3. Teachers at my school treat students fairly
4. My school is well maintained
5. I feel safe at my school
6. I can talk to my teachers about my concerns
7. Student behaviour is well managed at my school
8. I like being at my school
9. My school looks for ways to improve
10. My school takes students' opinions seriously
11. My teachers motivate me to learn
12. My school gives me opportunities to do interesting things
13. My school is well organised
14. Students help make decisions about things like school rules and student activities.

To assess whether there was any correlation between the responses to the 14 questions and ICSEA we analysed the agreement ratings calculated by DoE for 2014 and 2017 for the seven schools we visited. The results are shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Responses to DoE surveys in 2014 and 2017 and sorted by ICSEA score
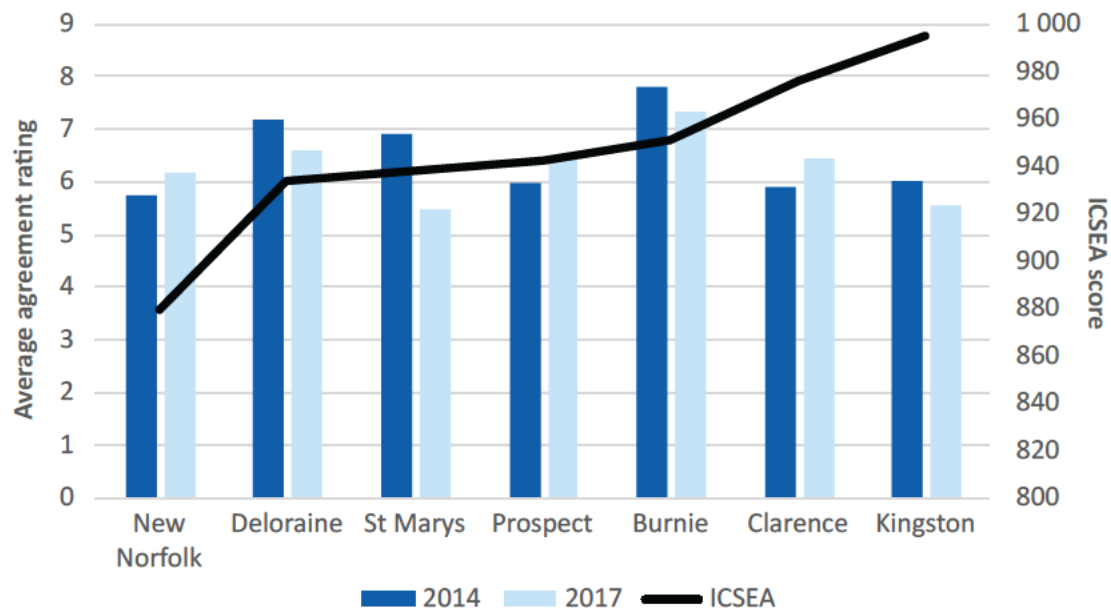

Source: TAO and DoE

Figure 12 shows there was no correlation between ICSEA and the average agreement rating for each school.

We decided to examine answers to Question 7 based on research conducted by the Grattan Institute that show interventions to improve class behaviour have the most effect on improving student engagement. Figure 13 shows the results of research by the Grattan Institute comparing how much impact various issues had on student achievement, presented here as a proxy for effects on student engagement.

Figure 13: Average effects of interventions on student achievement
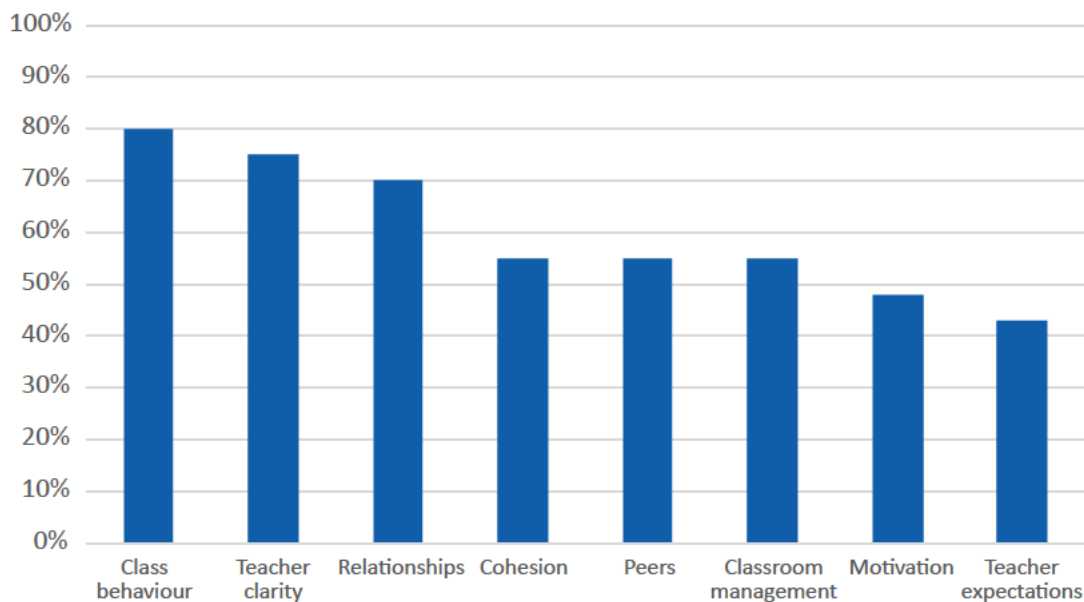
Source: TAO. The left axis compares the effect of issues affecting student engagement, which are listed on the horizontal axis, averaged across multiple studies, as reported by the Grattan Institute.

We analysed answers to Question 7, which asked students if behaviour is well managed at their school for schools visited during our audit. The results are shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14: Student responses to DoE Question 7
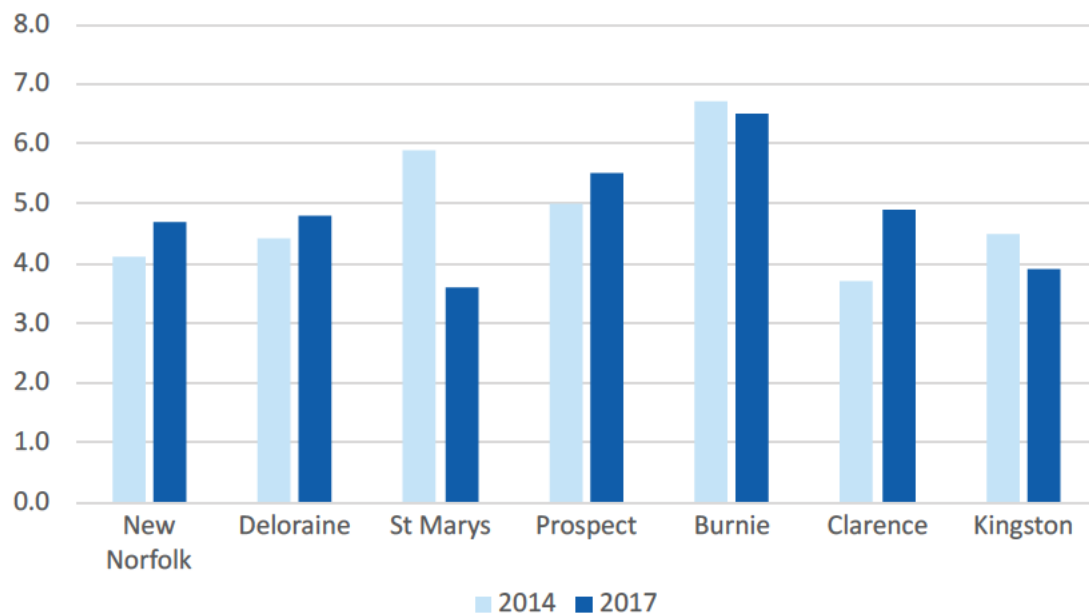
Source: TAO and DoE

Figure 14 shows students at five of the seven schools ranked the management of student behaviour below 5 out of 10 in 2017. This indicates that students at five of the seven schools visited were critical of the level of class behaviour at their school. This was a concern to us because Figure 13 (Grattan) indicated that class behaviour was the most important influence on student engagement.

Tasmanian Audit Office questions on engagement

We also attempted to collect information about engagement directly from students by asking:

1. Do you feel encouraged to do your best?
2. How important is it to have the curriculum delivered in ways that accommodates your learning style?
3. Is your learning style accommodated - does your teacher teach in ways that work for you?

We collected:

- 158 responses from Year 7 students
- 174 responses from Year 8 students
- 170 responses from Year 9 students
- 132 responses from Year 10 students.

Figure 15 shows the results for 'Do you feel encouraged to do your best?'

Figure 15: Results of TAO survey – do you feel encouraged to do your best?
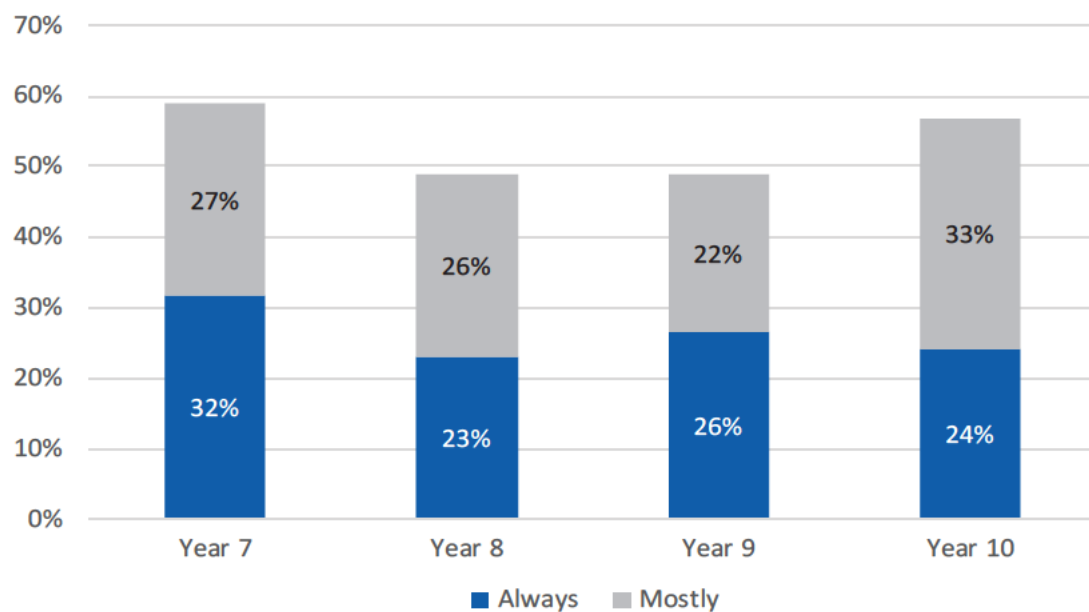
Source: TAO

Figure 15 shows a total of 59% of Year 7 students used the top ratings to respond to how encouraged they felt to do their best. Fewer Year 8 (49%) and Year 9 (48%) felt the same, while Year 10 (57%) was more aligned to the results for Year 7.

Figure 16 below shows the result for the other two questions:

- How important is it to have curriculum delivered in ways that accommodate your learning style?
- Is your learning style accommodated - does your teacher teach in ways that work for you?

Figure 16: Results of TAO survey – two questions on learning styles
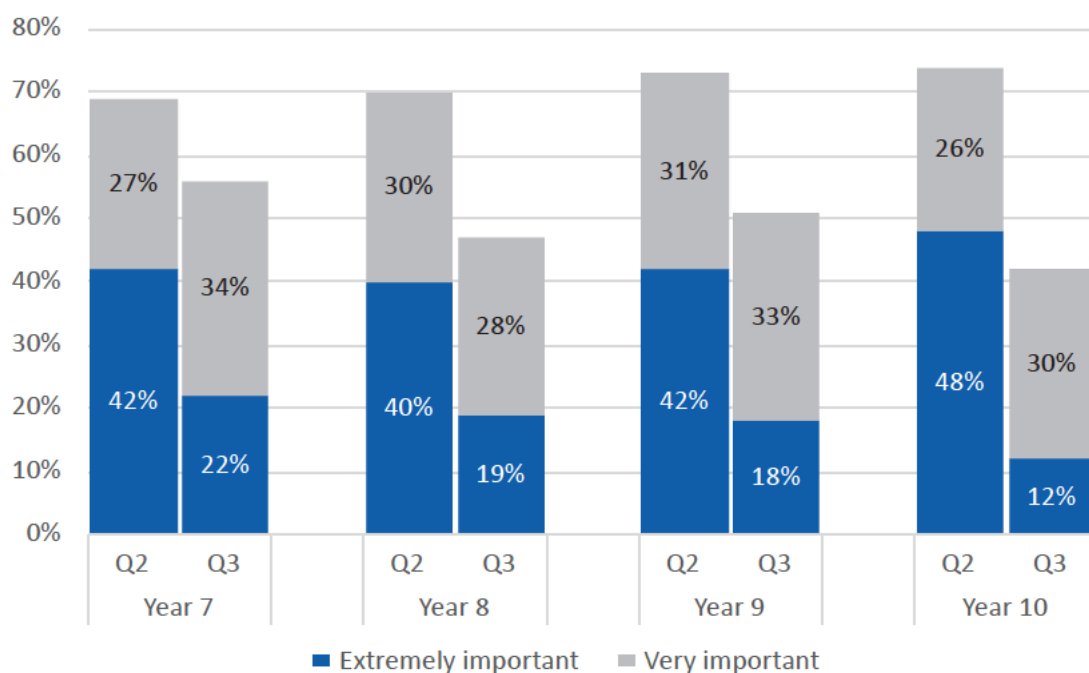
Source: TAO

Figure 16 shows:

- a total of 69% of Year 7 respondents used the two highest ratings for the importance of having the curriculum delivered in a way that accommodates their learning style
- but only a total of 56% of Year 7 respondents used the two highest ratings to agree that teachers delivered learning that accommodated their learning style, and this dropped to a total of 42% for Year 10 respondents.

The National School Improvement Tool

As mentioned in Section 2.5, the NSIT was made available to all Australian schools for use in their school improvement planning. DoE described the NSIT as a guide for all school improvement planning. The NSIT provides the following nine inter-related domains:

1. Explicit improvement agenda
2. Analysis and discussion of data
3. A culture that promotes learning
4. Targeted use of school resources
5. Expert teaching team
6. Systematic curriculum delivery
7. Differentiated teaching and learning
8. Effective pedagogical practices
9. School-community partnerships.

Three of the nine domains — 5, 7 and 8 — encourage and recognise the need to identify and implement approaches to learning based on strengths, weaknesses and preferences. Domain 7 relates to engagement and recognises that students learn and progress at different rates. The NSIT provides a self-rating tool for each school to make a judgment about where they are on their improvement journey based on four performance levels – Outstanding, High, Medium or Low (see Appendix 5 for details).

DoE advised us that schools use the NSIT as a framework to self-assess their performance against the nine domains of school improvement. NSIT assists schools to review and reflect on their efforts to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning.

Information from the Grattan Institute recommended the provision of practical tools to help teachers to:

- engage their classes
- identify triggers for student disengagement.

Tools that DoE provides to teachers to improve student engagement include a suite of Good Teaching Guides that highlight the need for productive relationships with students. The Good Teaching Guides provide information on ways teachers can influence and improve engagement in classroom learning and the broader school environment. During our school visits some teachers made reference to these guides.

Section 3.4 Summary of findings

As noted in Section 3.1, no definition of performance measures, or targets, specific to student engagement were found.

Research by the Grattan Institute and feedback from DoE satisfaction surveys together with audit evidence indicates classroom behaviour is an important factor that impacts on student engagement. Students who are attentive and engaged and want to learn but find the behaviour of other students disruptive may gradually find learning difficult and begin their own cycle of disengagement.

Feedback from students showed only 60% felt fully encouraged to do their best. More students in Years 7 and 10 felt fully encouraged to do their best than in Years 8 or 9.

More Year 7 students felt their learning styles were accommodated than Year 10 students. Year 10 students indicated that their expectations of the delivery of learning styles by teachers were significantly higher than their experience of the learning styles delivered by teachers.

The NSIT provides a guide for schools developing their school improvement plans.

Recommendations

18. Ensure schools use information that identifies issues that most affect student engagement when preparing school improvement plans.

19. Align satisfaction survey questions to issues that most affect student engagement to provide meaningful information for determining actions.

20. Investigate schools with improving survey results and formally share their strategies with other less successful schools.

21. Ensure teachers are provided with professional learning and development that focusses on maintaining student engagement.

22. Provide opportunities for less effective teachers to observe more effective teachers in the classroom and provide mentoring opportunities with a view to improving teacher performance.

3.5 Does DoE have strategies for managing and improving student engagement?

Although DoE has implemented an Engagement and Retention Policy and a Student Engagement Procedures, strategies for managing and improving student engagement are not specifically articulated in the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan.

We expected to find a risk register that identified mitigation strategies that would address causes of disengagement and a measurement system to track improvements in performance. However, student engagement is not specifically mentioned in DoE's risk management policies and processes.

We note actions that schools and Learning Services are required to implement to manage and improve student engagement are identified in DoE's Student Engagement Procedures. The actions are aligned with characteristics that describe a continuum of needs from everyday practice in the classroom (Tier 1) through to extra support to maintain engagement in students at risk of disengaging (Tier 2), responses that require students to have a personalised learning plan (Tier 3), to dedicated programs for students that have disengaged from their education altogether (Tier 4).

We consider this structured approach of responses, relative to the continuum of students' needs, represents a strategic approach to managing and improving student engagement.

Section 3.5 Summary of findings

While DoE has developed a risk management policy, it has yet to develop a risk register that identifies risks to student engagement.

Recommendation

23. Ensure the development of a risk register that identifies risks to student engagement and which also develops mitigation strategies for any identified risks.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
Act	*Education Act 2016*
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
Attendance level	Proportion of full-time students whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90% over the period
Attendance rate	Number of full-time equivalent (FTE) student days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible student days over the period
ASPIRE	Annual School Performance Information for Review of Education
DoE	Department of Education
DW3	Central database (data warehouse) for the majority of DoE data
ed*i*	A web portal providing student and school information for principals, teachers and school administration staff
EdID	Tasmanian Government school student identifier
EduPoint	Student administration system
Engagement Policy	DoE's Engagement and Retention Policy
FTE	Full-time equivalent
ICSEA	Index of community socio-educational advantage
KPMs	Key Performance Measures
My School	Website provided by ACARA to report information about Australian schools including NAPLAN
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy
NSIT	National School Improvement Tool
RA	Australian Bureau of Statistics rating for remoteness, i.e. Regional Area score
Registrar	Office of the Education Registrar
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SSS	Student Support System
TAO	Tasmanian Audit Office
USI	Unique Student Identifier

APPENDIX 1: AUDIT CRITERIA

The audit addressed the objectives through the following criteria and sub-criteria:

Audit criteria	Audit sub-criteria
1. What does the attendance and engagement data show?	
2. Is student attendance managed effectively?	2.1 Is student attendance recorded, monitored, reported and analysed?
	2.2 Is student attendance data used to inform decisions and responses?
	2.3 Does DoE involve parents and others in improving student attendance?
	2.4 Does DoE support and measure improvement in student attendance?
	2.5 Does DoE have strategies for managing and improving student attendance?
3. Is student engagement managed effectively?	3.1 Is student engagement recorded, monitored, reported and analysed?
	3.2 Is student engagement data used to inform decisions and responses?
	3.3 Does DoE involve parents and others in improving student engagement?
	3.4 Does DoE support and measure improvement in student engagement?
	3.5 Does DoE have strategies for managing and improving student engagement?

APPENDIX 2: SUBMISSIONS AND COMMENTS RECEIVED

Submissions and comments that we receive are not subject to the audit nor the evidentiary standards required in reaching an audit conclusion. Responsibility for the accuracy, fairness and balance of these comments rests solely with those who provided the response. However, views expressed by the Secretary for the Department of Education, were considered in reaching audit conclusions.

Section 30(3) of the Act requires that this report include any submissions or comments made under Section 30(2) or a fair summary of them. Submissions received are included in full below.

Thank you for providing me with the draft Report to Parliament for the performance audit: Student attendance and engagement: Years 7 to 10. I welcome the opportunity to comment on the Report and thank the Tasmanian Audit Office for their work.

I am pleased to note the Report's conclusion that key elements are in place within policies, processes and systems to support the Department of Education's (DoE's) effective management of student attendance and engagement for Years 7 to 10, and that the framework for managing student attendance and engagement is effective. I also recognise some key findings:

- The DoE has established appropriate systems and processes to identify and record student attendance and absence data so as to meet national reporting requirements, and processes to identify, monitor, report and analyse student attendance focused on individual students.

- The DOE involves parents and others in improving student engagement by providing information to encourage communication between parents, teachers and students.

- Note that the attendance results for Tasmania were not significantly different from any other jurisdiction.

The recommendations outlined in the Report are noted and will be taken into consideration through our ongoing work in furthering the goals of the *2018-2021 Department of Education Strategic Plan Learners First: Every Learner, Every Day.* In working through these recommendations, the Department will:

- build on existing strengths to develop a system-wide approach to improving student engagement

- continbue to strengthen system and school reporting systems for reviewing student attendance, including by year level, and setting targets toward school improvement of attendance

- develop further support for schools to measure, monitor and improve student engagement.

I am pleased to acknowledge the detailed report that recognises the work of teachers, school principals and the DoE in ensuring learners are supported with their attendance and engagement in Tasmanian Government High Schools.

Tim Bullard
Secretary
Department of Education

APPENDIX 3: SCHEMATIC OF DOE SYSTEMS RELATING TO STUDENT ATTENDANCE
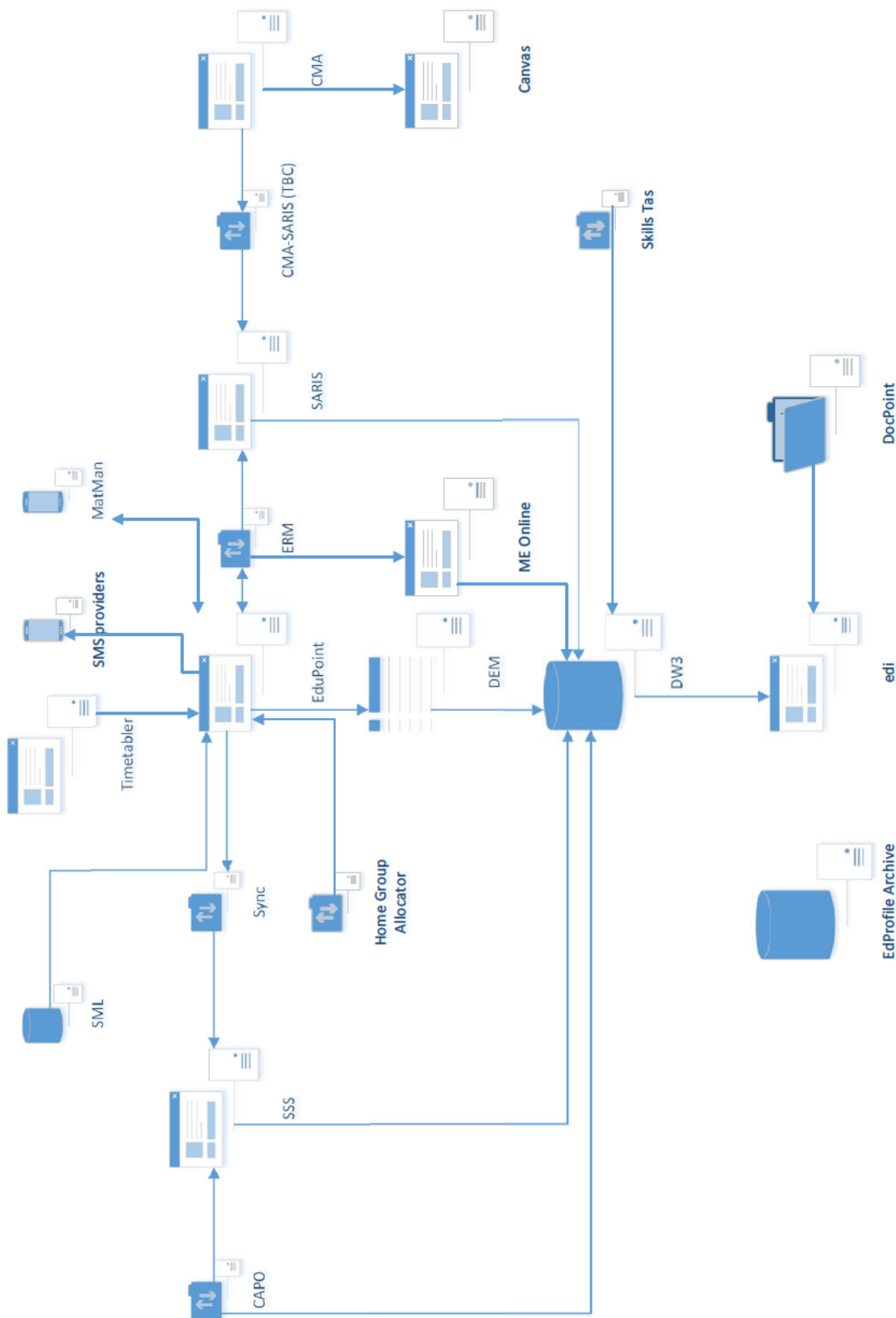
Source: DoE

2018–2021 Department of Education Strategic Plan

LEARNERS FIRST: EVERY LEARNER, EVERY DAY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION learners first

Tasmanian Government

OUR COMMITMENT — Together we inspire and support all learners to succeed as connected, resilient, creative and curious thinkers

OUR VALUES

Aspiration – a culture of high expectations and high achievement

Respect – respecting ourselves, others, our past and our environment

Courage – accepting challenges and embracing opportunities

Growth – improving by always learning and finding better ways to do things

OUR GOALS

Access, Participation and Engagement – Everyone is participating and engaged in learning and able to pursue life opportunities

Early Learning – From birth to 8 years of age, children are confident, involved learners and effective communicators

Wellbeing – Learners are safe, feel supported and are able to flourish, so they can engage in learning

Literacy and Numeracy – Learners have the skills and confidence in Literacy and Numeracy to successfully participate in learning, life and work

OUR PRIORITIES — All schools, services and business units will set their own priorities as part of this plan, by using **Inquiry Cycles** to identify 2–3 priorities for improvement that contribute to one or more of **Our Goals** to improve learner outcomes

OUR APPROACH TO IMPROVEMENT

Inquiry Cycles

We will improve by implementing a process for improvement across all schools, services and business units, underpinned by an Inquiry Cycle

(Cycle diagram: Scan and Assess → Prioritise → Develop and Plan → Act → Review)

Co-construction

Our improvement strategy will be **co-constructed** across the Department

Support for improvement

We develop and enable our people to **focus on improvement** by realigning our system, prioritising our supports and addressing barriers to maintaining the focus on continuous improvement

Department of Education

APPENDIX 5: NSIT PERFORMANCE RATINGS

Outstanding:

- The school leadership team actively promotes the use of differentiated teaching as a strategy for ensuring that every student is engaged and learning successfully. It is recognised throughout the school that some students require significant adjustments to their learning programs (e.g. accelerated programs, special support) if they are to be optimally engaged and challenged and individual learning plans have been developed for those students requiring them. Differentiation is a priority of the school and a feature of every teacher's practice.

- Regular data on achievements, progress, strengths and weaknesses of individual students are used in all classrooms to make judgements about individual needs, to identify appropriate starting points for teaching and to personalise teaching and learning activities. Reports to parents include details of how learning opportunities have been tailored to individual needs and the progress individuals have made.

High:

- School leaders explicitly encourage teachers to tailor their teaching to student needs and readiness. This includes the systematic use of assessment instruments (standardised assessment tasks and teacher developed assessment tools) to establish where individuals are in their learning and to identify skill gaps and misunderstandings. Teachers also are encouraged to respond to differences in cultural knowledge and experiences and to cater for individual differences by offering multiple means of representation, engagement and expression.

- Planning shows how the different needs of students are addressed, and how multiple opportunities to learn are provided, including multiple pathways for transition to external studies (e.g. apprenticeships) for students in Years 10-12. Students' workbooks also illustrate differentiated tasks and feedback.

- Reports to parents show progress over time and include suggestions for ways in which parents can support their children's learning.

Medium:

- School leaders are committed to success for all, but do not drive a strong classroom agenda to assess and identify individual learning needs or to differentiate teaching according to students' needs.

- Some use is made of assessment instruments to identify individual strengths and weaknesses and starting points for teaching, but this appears to be at the initiative of individual teachers rather than a school-wide expectation.

- Some use is made of differentiated teaching (e.g. differentiated reading groups in the early primary years), but in most classes teachers teach the same curriculum to all students with similar levels of individual support.

- Regular assessments of student learning are undertaken, but these often are summative and disconnected (e.g. relating to different topics) rather than exploring long-term progress in students' knowledge, skills and understandings over time.

- Reports to parents generally do not show progress or provide guidance to parents on actions they might take.

Low:

- School leaders do not place a high priority on teachers identifying and addressing individual learning needs, but are more focused on ensuring that all teachers are teaching the core year level curriculum.

- Little or no classroom use is made of assessment instruments to establish starting points for teaching. Assessments used only to establish summatively how much of the taught content students have learnt.

- Teachers tend to teach to the middle of the class, with the expectation that some students will not master the content, and finding ways to occupy more able students who finish work early.

- Reports to parents tend to be summative reports of how students have performed, with little guidance on what parents might do to assist in their children's learning.

AUDIT MANDATE AND STANDARDS APPLIED

Mandate

Section 17(1) of the *Audit Act 2008* states that:

> 'An accountable authority other than the Auditor-General, as soon as possible and within 45 days after the end of each financial year, is to prepare and forward to the Auditor-General a copy of the financial statements for that financial year which are complete in all material respects.'

Under the provisions of section 18, the Auditor-General:

'(1)   is to audit the financial statements and any other information submitted by a State entity or an audited subsidiary of a State entity under section 17(1).'

Under the provisions of section 19, the Auditor-General:

'(1)   is to prepare and sign an opinion on an audit carried out under section 18(1) in accordance with requirements determined by the Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards

(2)   is to provide the opinion prepared and signed under subsection (1), and any formal communication of audit findings that is required to be prepared in accordance with the Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards, to the State entity's appropriate Minister and provide a copy to the relevant accountable authority.'

Standards Applied

Section 31 specifies that:

> 'The Auditor-General is to perform the audits required by this or any other Act in such a manner as the Auditor-General thinks fit having regard to –

(a)   the character and effectiveness of the internal control and internal audit of the relevant State entity or audited subsidiary of a State entity; and

(b)   the Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards.'

The auditing standards referred to are Australian Auditing Standards as issued by the Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards Board.