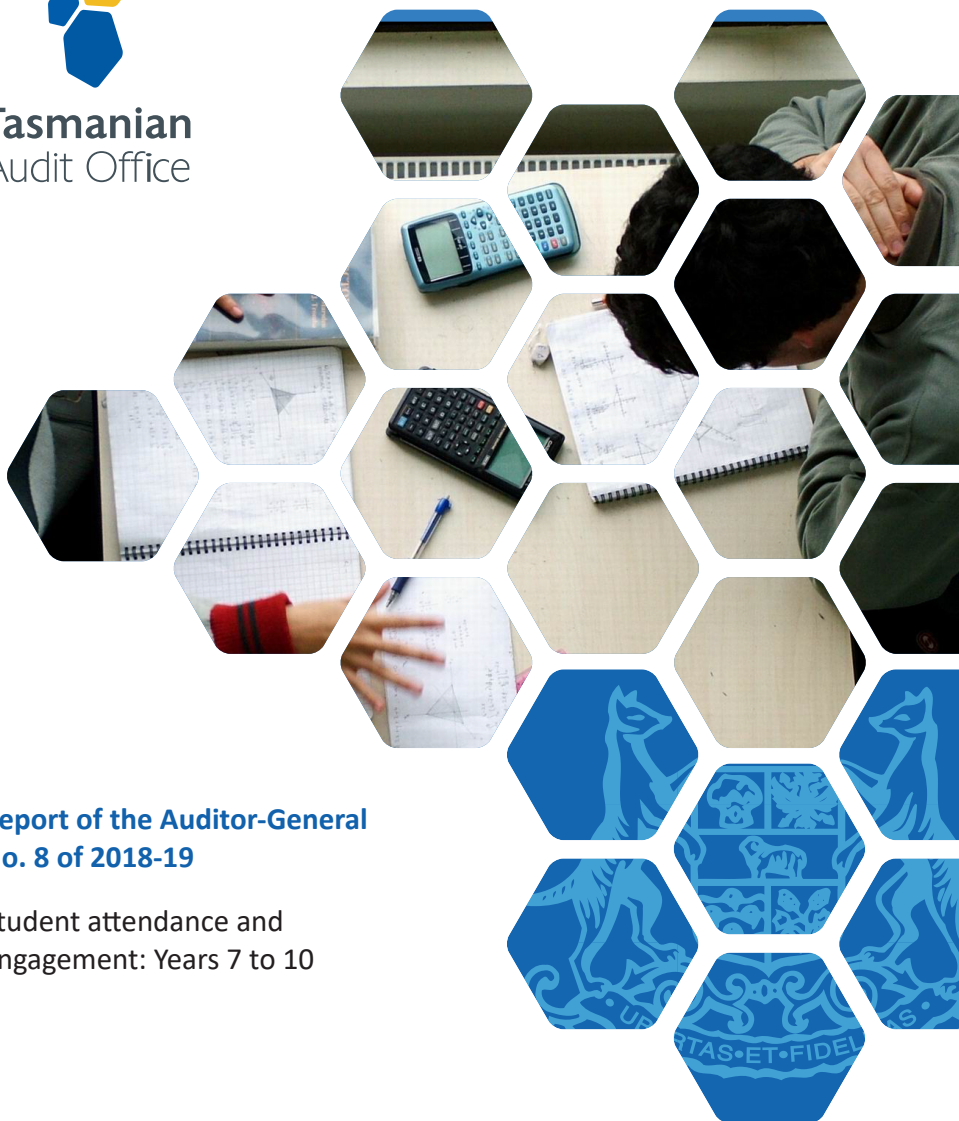




Tasmanian
Audit Office



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

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

March 2019

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
- 'student' means a person enrolled in school
- '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.

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 of the full Report.

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

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.

Findings and Recommendations

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.

Criterion 2 Is student attendance managed effectively?

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

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.

Findings and Recommendations

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.

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

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.

Findings and Recommendations

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?

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?

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.

Findings and Recommendations

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?

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.

Criterion 3 Is student engagement managed effectively?

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

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.

Findings and Recommendations

It was identified that:

- School staff record engagement information in student support system (SSS) records and monitor student engagement using reports accessible through *edi*, 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?

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.

Findings and Recommendations

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?

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, 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.


Findings and Recommendations

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.

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.



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Auditor-General

21 March 2019

NOTES

For the full report go to:

<https://www.audit.tas.gov.au/publication-category/performance-audit>



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