**School attendance strategies:** Results of a survey of Queensland state school leaders

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| **Introduction**  **Background**  On any given day, nine per cent of Queensland’s state school students are absent from school. An average absence rate of nine per cent equates to a student missing more than one full year of schooling from Prep to Year 10. Low attendance can lead to poor academic results, limited employment opportunities and lower lifetime income. Parents are obliged to ensure their children attend every school day unless there is a reasonable excuse.  **What is this report about?**  In April–May 2015, approximately 300 Queensland state school leaders were invited to participate in an online survey about initiatives and strategies for increasing student attendance. A key aim was to examine points of difference between schools with higher or improving attendance rates and those with lower attendance rates with no improvement trend. Findings from the survey will help inform further work by the department in relation to improving student attendance.  **How was the survey conducted?**  The survey was administered through a secure departmental web page, and supported by communications to school leaders encouraging responses. Of the 300 schools invited to participate 157 (55%) completed the survey.  The survey also included a series of questions that enabled comparisons with results from a 2012 survey coordinated by the Queensland Audit Office.  **What are the main messages?**   1. A wide variety of attendance strategies, procedures and approaches are used by school leaders, with most perceived as having a slight to moderate impact. 2. Primary and secondary school leaders sometimes use different strategies to address student absenteeism. 3. Schools with higher and lower attendance rates often use similar strategies but those with higher attendance rates more frequently perceive their strategies as having a greater impact. |

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| **Perceived Main Causes Of Non-attendance** |
| *Top five perceived main causes of non-attendance for students with a history of poor attendance,* *for all respondents and by school type*   |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  |  |  | |  | | | |
| Across all schools, the five most commonly cited reasons for the non-attendance of students with a history of poor attendance were: parent apathy; family issues; student illness; family holiday; and student refusal. The main differences between primary and secondary schools were: family holiday was cited more frequently by primary school leaders and student refusal, student mental health and student disengagement were cited more frequently by secondary school leaders. |

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| **Strategies To Communicate School Expectations**  More than 90 per cent of the school leaders surveyed used the following strategies to communicate school expectations about attendance:   * Discussing the importance of student attendance in the classroom. * Regularly reminding parents through newsletters and/or social media of the importance of student attendance. * Regularly providing reminders of the importance of student attendance during school assemblies.   School leaders noted that chronic non-attending students required significant support, with associated higher levels of resourcing for activities such as telephone calls, meetings, home visits and liaison with external agencies. |

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| **Strategies To Improve Or Maintain Attendance** |
| Strategies perceived to have a substantial impact included actions to improve student wellbeing; strengthen the school’s relationships with families (used more in primary schools); ensure students feel connected to the school; and reward programs for attendance. ‘Dedicated attendance officers’ was the strategy most frequently perceived to have a significant impact for monitoring student absences.  The strategy perceived to have the most significant impact for students with lower attendance was referral ‘to school support staff (e.g. guidance officer, chaplain, Youth Support Co-ordinator)’. All secondary schools and two thirds of the primary schools used this strategy. |

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| **Schools Are Making Better Use Of Data To Improve Attendance Rates** |
| *Comparison of 2012 and 2015 survey results*   | **Survey questions** | **2012\*** | **2015** | | --- | --- | --- | | Attendance data is analysed regularly to identify trends and patterns of absenteeism (% agree/strongly agree) | 84 | 93 | | Unexplained absences are consistently followed up within three days (% agree/strongly agree) | 72 | 86 | | Reports on trends and patterns of attendance are generated regularly (% agree/strongly agree) | 60 | 79 | | The strategies your school has put in place to increase student attendance are: |  |  | | * Phone calls (% used) | 95 | 98 | | * Meeting parents (% used) | 82 | 91 | | * Letters (for individual absences) (% used) | 79 | 62 | | * SMS texts to parents (% used) | 20 | 31 |   *\* Results are from a 2012 Queensland Audit Office survey of 107 selected school leaders.* |
| Compared to 2012, a greater percentage of school leaders in 2015 said they regularly analyse and report on attendance and absenteeism data, and consistently follow up on unexplained absences. There was also greater use of SMS texting and less use of letters to parents for individual absences. |

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| **Further Information**  For further information on DET’s approach to school absenteeism and student attendance, visit the *Every day counts* web page (<http://education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/>). |
| **Who Took Part In The Survey?** |
| *Profile of respondents (schools with higher and lower attendance rates)*   |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | **Sample**  **%** | **Sample**  **N** | **Mean attendance rate 2012-14** | **Mean school size**  **(enrolments)** | **Mean ICSEA score 2014** | | **Primary schools**  Higher  Lower |  |  |  |  |  | | 51 | 52 | 94.0% | 373 | 1026 | | 49 | 50 | 89.5% | 34 | 895 | | **Secondary schools**  Higher  Lower |  |  |  |  |  | | 50 | 20 | 88.3% | 1103 | 990 | | 50 | 20 | 84.8% | 753 | 928 | |  |  |  |  |  |  | |
| Two sub-samples of approximately 150 schools were invited to participate in the survey, based on their average student attendance rates and attendance rate changes in recent years. One sub-sample comprised schools with higher or strongly improving attendance rates, and the other was schools with lower attendance rates and no positive change in their attendance rates over time.  Completed surveys were received from 15 combined schools (prep to Year 10 or 12), 102 primary schools and 40 secondary schools. Due to the small number of responses from combined schools, results reported by school type focus on primary and secondary schools. Note that schools with lower attendance rates were substantially smaller in size and had higher proportions of lower socio-socioeconomic (lower SES) students, on average, than schools with higher attendance. |

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| **What Importance Is Placed on Attendance?** |
| Respondents were asked: ‘What level of importance does this school place on monitoring attendance?’ and on ‘improving attendance?’ Overall, 96.2% of respondents said that monitoring attendance was very important and 93.6% said that improving attendance was very important for their school. These percentages were similar across school types and for schools with lower and higher attendance rates. |

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| **What Are The Main Strategies Used?** |
| *Strategies to improve and maintain attendance, for all respondents and by school type – usage and impact ratings (%)* |
| Respondents were presented with a series of strategies that could be used to improve or maintain student attendance, and were asked: ‘In the last 12 months has this school used any of the following strategies’; and ‘If used, what was the overall impact on students’ attendance?’ The most frequently used strategy was ‘ensuring that learning occurs every school day’. Most strategies had been used in the previous 12 months, but were often perceived to have only slight to moderate impacts. |

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| **Students With Lower Attendance** |
| *Strategies for intervention and support for students with lower attendance, for all respondents and by school type – usage and impact ratings (%)* |
| Respondents were presented with a series of strategies that provide intervention and support for students who have poor attendance or who have been identified as at-risk of poor attendance. The results show that all strategies were more frequently used by secondary than primary school leaders; and that secondary school leaders much more frequently used:   * implementation of disciplinary actions (e.g. detention for truancy) * initiation of a prosecution process for parents who continue to neglect their legal obligations * development and implementation of Individual Attendance Improvement Plans.   The strategy perceived to have the most significant impact on the attendance of those with a poor history of attendance, especially by secondary school leaders, was referral ‘to school support staff (e.g. guidance officer, chaplain, Youth Support Co-ordinator)’. All secondary schools and two thirds of the primary schools had used this strategy. |