

# Report to the ACT Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services on Non Attendance in ACT Government Schools December 2001

In July 2000 the then Minister for Education asked the Ministerial Advisory Council on Government Schooling to report to him on non attendance at ACT Government Schools.

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**Ministerial Advisory Council on Government Schooling**

**Report to the ACT Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services**

**on**

**Non Attendance in ACT Government Schools**

**December 2001**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

In July 2000, the Ministerial Advisory Council on Government Schooling was asked by the then Minister for Education to inquire into and report to him on non attendance at ACT Government schools. Specifically, it was asked to:

- Examine the incidence of non attendance at both primary and secondary schools paying particular attention to student groups already identified as 'at risk'.
- Investigate any connection between behaviour management, engagement of students, and non attendance patterns.
- Examine existing support mechanisms in the light of information emerging from this investigation, and suggest alternative strategies, or changes to existing strategies, within the constraints of existing resources.

Council did not examine the issue of students who are neither enrolled in school nor registered for home schooling because of insufficient reliable information. Council did not inquire into the retention rate between years 10 and 11 for similar reasons.

### **Forms of Non Attendance**

There are several forms of non attendance including parent condoned absences and absence because of sickness. Council focused on persistent absenteeism because of its deleterious effect on student outcomes. Persistent absenteeism may take the form of many short-period absences over several months or long periods of absence.

Persistent lateness is a serious problem in many schools and may be a precursor to persistent absenteeism by some students.

### **Incidence of Non Attendance**

While individual schools have always recorded attendance, attendance data has not been collated on a system basis in the ACT until recently. In 2001, the Department of Education, in collaboration with the Council, implemented a new collection system known as the Student Attendance Measurement Project. Data collected in first term was used to inform Council's deliberations.

Preliminary results show that persistent absenteeism is an issue for ACT government schools. In particular:

- Average high school absenteeism was over one and a half times that of primary students (3.2 days per term compared to 1.9 for primary schools).
- Attendance was relatively stable in the primary school years but absentee rates increased through the high school years from 4.8 per cent in year 7 to 7.4 per cent in year 10.

- About 1000 students missed more than 20 per cent (10 days) of the school term. About 2 per cent of primary school students and 5.3 per cent of high school students were absent for more than 10 days per term.
- There was no gender difference in attendance rates.
- Indigenous attendance has improved but absenteeism was twice the rate of all students and there was a higher proportion absent for more than 20 per cent of the term.

Attendance rates in the ACT appear to be slightly better than those in other States for which attendance data is available on a system basis. The patterns of absenteeism in other states are broadly similar to those of the ACT. However, there may be differences in the data collection methods and the ACT data is only for one term.

### **Factors Contributing to Persistent Absenteeism**

The identification of the factors contributing to students' persistent absenteeism provides the basis for intervention to reintegrate the student into the school.

Research shows that socioeconomic disadvantage and family and personal circumstances contribute to persistent absenteeism. Students in situations of disadvantage and difficult family circumstances tend to miss school more often than other students. A recent survey has estimated that there are about 16 000 adults and about 10 000 children living in poverty in the ACT.

However, these factors only partially explain persistent absenteeism. Schools with similar intakes of students often have widely varying rates of attendance.

A range of overseas and Australian research studies have demonstrated a clear relationship between school-based factors and patterns of non attendance. These studies point to the significant influence of school organisation and climate, bullying and harassment, curriculum, teaching practices, lack of achievement at school and student/teacher relationships on student attendance patterns.

School-based factors can exacerbate and compound the effects of social disadvantage and family and personal circumstances on attendance. All these influences interact in different and complex ways to cause persistent non-attendance.

Council's research into the factors contributing to persistent absence from school, the evidence relevant to the ACT and its own consultations suggest that the following factors contribute to persistent absence from school in ACT government schools:

- socioeconomic disadvantage and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background and related issues such as homelessness;

- parent condoned absence from school is an issue as is the number of students who have to care for parents and siblings;
- negative or non-supporting attitudes of some parents to school;
- schools are not seen as friendly places by almost 50 per cent of high school students;
- a small group of students may experience serious harassment and bullying;
- curriculum and teaching practices are a source of much student dissatisfaction with about 40 per cent of high school students stating that classes are not interesting;
- lack of success in literacy and numeracy outcomes for a significant proportion of high school students;
- there is a large gap between student expectations of teacher/student relationships in high schools and their perceptions of these relationships in practice and about 40 per cent of students feel that teachers do not understand them.

These findings also suggest that school based factors contribute significantly to the higher absenteeism amongst high school students.

### **Strategies for Improving Attendance**

Council believes that an overall strategy for improving attendance includes four main elements:

- attendance monitoring and follow up procedures;
- encouragement and support mechanisms;
- student engagement at school; and
- parent/carer and community participation.

#### *Attendance monitoring and follow up*

Council supports the continuation of the Student Attendance Measurement Project. Collection, analysis and reporting of attendance data provides the basis for developing successful strategies to reduce absenteeism.

Attendance records alert teachers with roll marking and pastoral care responsibility of possible problems faced by individual students. They provide the benchmark rates of attendance/absence used for initiating follow up action for individual students. Analysis of school and system attendance data may reveal issues in attendance patterns that need to be addressed.

Council has recommended the development of a system policy statement on school attendance and school policies on the recording, monitoring and follow up processes

related to attendance. All teachers, students and parents/carers should be made fully aware of these policies and procedures.

Council has identified a need to track students as they move between schools and school sectors. At present, there is no systematic transfer process.

Council also supports the development of processes whereby parents/carers inform schools of their child's absence and schools contact parents when a student is absent without reason.

### *Support mechanisms*

The ACT Government provides a wide range of support mechanisms which indirectly or directly bear upon attendance issues in schools. These mechanisms address aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage, family and personal difficulties and student support in schools. Council focused on school-based support mechanisms and other programs that are closely connected with schools.

Several new initiatives have been taken to assist students 'at risk'. At some stage, the alternative learning programs for students 'at risk' adopted in several secondary schools should be evaluated with a view to determining the contribution they make to improved attendance and learning outcomes.

In general, schools make good use of existing in-school, system and other support mechanisms and Council did not perceive major gaps in the range of support measures available to students. The only gap drawn to the attention of Council was a perceived need for home-school liaison officers who could follow up on poor attendance and introduce families and students to support mechanisms in school and in the community. Council supports the introduction of a few pilot projects in the use of home-school liaison officers.

There are indications that the level of resources is not adequate to meet the demands on several key school support mechanisms. In particular, school counselling needs and support for students with severe behavioural problems should be reviewed.

Council also considers there is a case to examine the suitability of learning assistance programs in the upper primary years, the use of learning assistance points in high schools and the need to increase the proportion of qualified staff in the program. Consideration could also be given to providing special learning assistance programs in the college years.

### *Engagement of students*

The increasing absenteeism through the high school years, together with the research on the contribution of school-based factors to such absenteeism, points to a critical need to improve the relevance and meaning of education at this level for all students. The proportion of high school students who report that high schools are unfriendly places, where they do boring or irrelevant school work and where the teachers do not

understand them makes extension of the existing high school improvement program an urgent priority.

Council supports the High Schools for the New Millennium Project but has recommended an enhanced high school improvement program based on several key principles and priorities for change. The principles emphasise:

- establishing friendly and caring learning communities;
- adult support for youth development;
- that every student can achieve success in school;
- the value of problem-based and real world learning experiences;
- student participation in designing and evaluating learning experiences; and
- school/community partnerships in learning.

The main priorities for the improvement program are:

- additional high school staff and central office support staff;
- professional and community forums on high school improvement;
- revised accountability arrangements;
- review of the Year 10 Certificate;
- review of high school curriculum;
- more effective teaching practices; and
- revised pre-service teacher training.

#### *Parent/Carer and community participation*

Parent/Carer participation in schooling and the learning of their children is fundamental to improving attendance at schools and outcomes for students 'at risk'. Council has recommended the following priorities for the future development of parent/carers involvement in student learning:

- a system program to support parent/carers involvement in literacy and numeracy learning;
- improved communication and reporting to parents/carers on student progress, attendance and school policies and programs; and
- training for parent/carers participation.

Council also encourages further community involvement with schools to provide for a greater range of real world learning opportunities that can be integrated into the curriculum. It supports the continuing efforts of the Department of Education to extend school/community links.

Council's recommendations follow.

## **Recommendations**

The issue of non attendance is complex and clearly a multi pronged strategy will be required. The recommendations address a total strategy for improving attendance based around four key elements. These are:

- Attendance monitoring and follow up procedures;
- Encouragement and support mechanisms;
- Student engagement at school; and
- Parent/Carer and community participation.

### **▮ Attendance monitoring and follow up procedures**

#### ***Short term***

- An attendance policy statement be developed for the ACT Government school system as a whole (ch 3).
- Individual school boards develop a policy on the recording, monitoring and follow up process related to attendance that should be part of the documentation of the school and should be communicated to students, parents/carers and staff at least once a year (ch 3).
- Continue developing the data collection system and the regular reporting of attendance rates and analysis (ch 3).
- Introduce a system that enables students to be tracked between schools by electronic means and/or transfer certificate (ch 3).

#### ***Mid term***

- Schools evaluate and address significant local factors in attendance patterns. They should report, possibly in school board annual reports, on initiatives adopted by the school to promote regular attendance and to address any factors identified as locally significant in improving attendance (ch 3).
- The department and schools work towards the situation where it becomes common practice for parents/carers to inform the school of their child's absence from school on or before the absence with a view to making it feasible for schools to contact parents/carers about students who are absent without reason (ch 3).

### ***Long term***

- Further action research be undertaken into retention from year 10 to college enrolment and the College Action Research Project on retention between years 11 and 12 be continued (ch 2).
- Consideration be given to ways of identifying the cohort of students of compulsory school age who may not have enrolled in school (ch 2).

## **D Encouragement and support mechanisms**

### ***Short term***

- Examine:
  - the suitability of learning assistance programs for students in the upper primary school;
  - the possibility of increasing the proportion of qualified teachers in learner assistance programs; and
  - the use of learning assistance points in high schools (ch 5).
- Counselling needs in ACT Government schools be reviewed (ch 5).
- Current approaches and provisions for supporting primary and secondary students with serious behavioural problems be evaluated (ch 5).
- The department continue its efforts through its Community Partnerships Section and other programs to extend school/community links (ch 6).

### ***Mid term***

- A number of pilot projects that place Home School Liaison Officers in schools/districts be established. These projects could help establish good practice principles and procedures before extension of the program (ch 6).
- Evaluate alternative learning programs for students 'at risk' (ch 5).

### ***Long term***

- Consideration be given to providing learning assistance measures in college, particularly in the areas of literacy, numeracy and organisational skills (ch 5).

## **▷ Student engagement at school**

- Develop and implement a systematic program for further high school improvement to build on the High Schools for the New Millennium Program and to address the issues raised relating to school factors affecting persistent absenteeism and the principles and priorities recommended by Council (ch 6). The main priorities are:
  - provide regular professional and community forums on high school improvement;
  - appoint additional staff to high schools;
  - expand the High Schools for the New Millennium Project and central office support for the project;
  - introduce new accountability arrangements for the use of additional funds;
  - review the Year 10 Certificate;
  - revise the curriculum frameworks and provide additional support for curriculum development in high schools that is relevant to student needs and integrates learning opportunities in the community;
  - support the extension of effective teaching practices, with greater recourse to real-world problems and issues and community learning activities, and align those practices with curriculum, assessment and reporting; and
  - training on adolescent development and support be included in pre-service teacher training.

## **▷ Parent/Carer and community participation**

### ***Short term***

- Improve communication and reporting to parents/carers on student progress, attendance, school policies and programs (ch 6).

### ***Mid term***

- Develop a system program to support parent/carers involvement in literacy and numeracy learning (ch 6).
- Provide in-service training for staff on developing parent/carers participation (ch 6).

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 *Terms of Reference*

Council was asked by the Minister in July 2000 to inquire into and report on non attendance at ACT Government schools. The terms of reference for the inquiry were as follows:

- Examine the incidence of non attendance at both primary and secondary schools paying particular attention to student groups already identified as 'at risk'.
- Investigate any connection between behaviour management, engagement of students, and non attendance patterns.
- Examine existing support mechanisms in the light of information emerging from this investigation, and suggest alternative strategies, or changes to existing strategies, within the constraints of existing resources.

## 1.2 *Attendance and educational outcomes*

Regular attendance at school, or an approved alternative, such as home schooling, is essential for success in schooling and for success in academic, social and personal development. Absence from school can limit a student's achievement of essential knowledge and skills required for effective participation in work, relationships and families, and as active citizens in the community.

Research indicates that "there is a very strong correlation between under achievement in primary school, non attendance in later years and lack of success in adult life" (Reid 1999, p103).

In Council's view poor attendance can create a category of 'at risk' students. Students are 'at risk' because:

- they may not achieve their potential in educational, social and physical development; and/or
- they may, during the time of absences, place themselves in an environment of harm.

Council noted from the research that "once students have begun to absent themselves from school and the initial cause of this remains undetected or unexplored, it is likely that the pattern of absence will continue and escalate through the student's subsequent school career" (Reid 1999, p95).

Council sees that the primary objective of the report is to contribute to better attendance and schooling outcomes for ACT Government school students.

## 2 FORMS OF NON ATTENDANCE

### 2.1 *Patterns of non attendance across sectors*

Non attendance is complex and it is difficult to make generalisations that are valid for all schools and all students. However, all forms of absence, if prolonged, will affect educational outcomes.

Patterns of non attendance and reasons for absence differ with the age of students and are affected by the organisation of school sessions and classes.

### 2.2 *Forms of non attendance*

The following forms of non attendance have been identified:

- legitimate non attendance, for example for sickness or disability;
- non attendance without parent/carer knowledge or approval;
- non attendance with parent/carer knowledge;
- non attendance for part of the day;
- end of year absence, particularly in year 10;
- persistent lateness, at the start of school or for particular sessions or classes;
- non enrolment which may take place at entry age or during a transfer between schools.

Non attendance can be irregular for short periods or persistent over long periods. The terms of reference are primarily concerned with persistent non attendance. It includes a number of short-term absences over several months or long periods of absence from school.

Council recognises that absence is often viewed in terms of being 'legitimate' or 'non legitimate'. Legitimate absences from school over long periods are mostly related to illness and disability, these can have serious implications for future learning. There are usually processes for dealing with this form of absence; for example, teachers sending work home, hospital school and teachers for the chronically ill.

Despite some ambiguity between the concepts of 'legitimate' and 'non legitimate' absence the effects are comparable. This stresses how important it is that efforts be made to reduce the extent of absence from school whatever its kind.

Both primary and secondary schools reported student lateness as a serious problem. Both sectors encountered students who are persistently late. Both sectors reported that in many cases parents/carers offered little support to rectify the situation. It was not uncommon for children from dysfunctional families to be late because of the parent/carer.

### 2.3 *Focus of the report*

For the purpose of this report, Council has defined the first six categories of non attendance listed in 2.2 as 'absenteeism'. It has focused its deliberations on these issues in relation to primary and high schools. It has considered the important role of parents/carers and their cooperation with schools and students to limit absence and lateness.

An issue for schools is to decide when absenteeism becomes a problem requiring investigation and support beyond a routine follow up with the student and parents/carers. Chapter 3 outlines the new process for measuring attendance and benchmarking. Chapter 4 discusses issues pertaining to persistent absenteeism.

The seventh form of non attendance listed in 2.2 relates to non enrolment. Council is concerned that there may be a cohort of children in the compulsory school age group who are not enrolled in schools or in the department's home schooling program. There are several types of possible non enrolment at school, such as:

- failure to enrol in kindergarten;
- failure to enrol on arrival in the ACT from other areas;
- leaving a school and not enrolling in a school elsewhere.

Council has been unable to consider this group of non attenders because of lack of data which is reliable and not anecdotal in nature. Council is concerned that there does not appear to be an adequate mechanism for identifying these children. Council raised the possibility of comparing the school age cohort from the 2001 Census and actual numbers of children attending various school opportunities. The enormity of this task did not escape Council's discussions.

The department may consider a way of identifying the cohort of students of compulsory school age who have not enrolled in school. The National Educational Truancy Service (NETS) program in New Zealand may be of some use in this consideration.

Council has not attempted to research the retention rates between years 11 and 12, nor the retention rate between year 10 and college enrolment. Council suggests that the College Action Research Project on Student Retention, mentioned in 5.4, be continued.

Council has not addressed in any detail the issue of home schooling. The home schooling policy of the department and its implementation was very satisfactorily presented to Council.

### **3 RECORDING AND REPORTING ATTENDANCE**

Records of attendance are fundamental to any response to absenteeism at the level of the individual student, school or system. The attendance records alert teachers with roll marking and pastoral care responsibility of possible problems faced by individual students. They provide the benchmark rates of attendance/absence used for initiating follow up action for individual students. Collection, analysis and reporting of attendance form the basis for developing successful strategies to combat absenteeism and engage all students. It is the actions taken as a result of the alert that will focus on the resolution of problems and influence future attendance.

#### *3.1 Legislative and Departmental requirements*

The Education Act 1937 provides for the compulsory enrolment and attendance at school of children of compulsory school age, that is, between 6 and 15 years of age. The Act also stipulates requirements for keeping records of attendance, inspection of records and other measures to support compulsory education.

The department requires all schools to maintain enrolment and attendance registers and to have procedures in place where parents/carers account for absence or lateness by signed notes. Schools are expected to have follow up procedures and to respond to habitual lateness or absenteeism. The issue was raised with Council that neither the Act nor the department has set a minimum attendance requirement that would identify satisfactory attendance.

ACT schools have always recorded attendance manually on paper rolls. Colleges and high schools are increasingly using electronic rolls for aggregated school information. Schools use this information to monitor attendance for individual students and to compile aggregated school data.

#### *3.2 Student Attendance Measurement Project*

In the first term of 2001 the department, in collaboration with the Ministerial Advisory Council on Government Schooling, implemented a new collection of attendance data at the system level. This is known as the Student Attendance Measurement Project in ACT Schools.

Council understands that the purpose of the project is to provide system information to support schools in their analysis of attendance. It will enable schools to focus on students 'at risk' and to develop benchmarks for their continuous improvement plans. Benchmarks will also be developed to support Indigenous students' attendance and report to the Commonwealth.

### 3.3 *The data collection process*

In this section, Council briefly summarises the process used for the system data collection and the information available from the first collection. The information provided covers only a single school term, term 1 2001. The process is as follows:

- schools are provided with the rationale and guidelines for the absence data collection each term in the information technology (IT) update;
- wherever possible the attendance data is recorded in MAZE using procedures schools deem the most efficient;
- absences counted include all time out of school excluding excursions and suspensions;
- the data extraction for terms 1, 2 and 3 takes place during the third week of the following term, allowing time for students to explain absences and schools to amend their records;
- the data used for term 4 covers the period until the end of November and the data will be extracted during December; and
- the Strategic Planning Section (Education and Training) produce reports for each school and for the Schools' Directorate by the end of each following term.

There is no need for any extra work in high schools and colleges for the system extraction except to ensure that the absence data entry is up to date. The timing of the collection has been designed to coincide with the extraction for Centrelink.

Issues considered in measuring attendance at high schools and colleges include:

- attendance is measured in classes and converted to days;
- students' class loads vary;
- schools may have significant partial absences and lateness that are not captured in this collection;
- a lack of conformity exists across the sectors. For example some schools mark in half days, some in class periods. This has been addressed in the conversion formula; and
- high schools and colleges that change their timetable need to inform the attendance program manager.

The IT Support Section has designed a MAZE screen to allow primary schools to enter the total days absent for each student at the end of each term. Schools are requested to enter term totals into MAZE by the end of week 3 in terms 2, 3 and 4 and by the end of the year for term 4.

Special schools are able to choose from the above methods in consultation with IT Support and their data extraction is monitored by IT Support.

The following data is extracted from MAZE: student ID, school, year level, gender, Indigenous status, and total days absent (for the primary sector) or classes missed as a proportion of total possible classes (for the secondary sector).

The following system and school statistics are calculated:

- average percentage attendance by year level;
- average days absent by year level (graphical);
- average days absent by level and gender; and
- number and percentage of students missing more than 20 per cent of schooling.

The Indigenous analysis contains the following comparison statistics for Indigenous and non Indigenous students:

- Average days absent by level of schooling; and
- Number and percentage of students missing more than 20 per cent.

Schools are expected to keep their electronic rolls current and accurate and to review the system summaries provided. Where results are unexpected, statistics will be checked centrally. The attendance statistics will be used by Quality Assurance Section in Principals' Appraisals and the School Development program. The reasons for significant absence can be many and varied and it is expected that students with significant absence, such as missing more than 20 per cent of school, will be monitored at the school level.

### 3.4 *Incidence of absenteeism*

The following statistics are based on a standard number of 50 days per term. It is necessary to convert class attendance at the college level to an equivalent number of days of attendance. The department is in the process of developing a valid means of conversion acceptable to all stakeholders. In the meantime statistics have been provided for years K to 10.

**Table 1: Percentage attendance by year level term 1 2001**

<b>Year</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
Percentage Attendance	95.9	96.0	96.4	96.4	96.3	96.3	96.1	95.2	93.9	93.1	92.6

Table 1 reports the total attendance of students in each year level as a percentage of the total possible days of attendance by all students. It shows that in term 1 2001, average rates of attendance were very satisfactory but declined from year 7 to year 10.

**Figure 1: Average days absent by year level, term 1 2001**

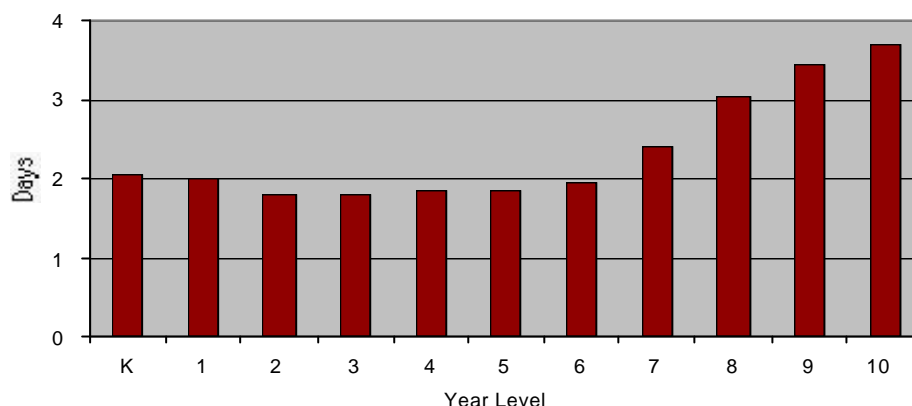


Figure 1 shows the average days absent for each year level for term 1 2001. There were 58 days in term 1 2001 and the reported 'days' have been scaled to a standard term of 50 days to facilitate term to term comparisons.

The graph illustrates that in term 1 2001, average days absence per student was relatively stable in years K to 6, but increased from years 7 to 10.

**Table 2: Average days absent by sector and gender term 1 2001**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>High School</b>
Females	1.9	3.2
Males	2.0	3.2
Total students	1.9	3.2

Table 2 provides sector information with a gender breakdown on the average number of days absent per student in term 1 2001, scaled to a standard term of 50 days. The results show that male and female average absence rates were similar.

**Table 3: Number and percentage of students absent for 10 or more days of schooling in term 1 2001.**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>High School</b>
Number of Students	431	547
Percentage of Students	2.0	5.3

**Table 4: Percentage of students absent for 10 or more days of schooling in term 1 2001 by year level and gender.**

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Female	1.2	1.2	1.5	2.0	1.7	2.1	2.2	3.0	4.1	6.4	8.1
Male	2.1	2.0	1.1	1.0	1.8	1.6	2.5	3.5	5.4	5.5	6.0
Total	1.7	1.6	1.3	1.5	1.7	1.9	2.4	3.3	4.8	6.0	7.0

A level of absence of 10 days per standard term is equivalent to an absence rate of 20 per cent and represents the loss of a significant amount of schooling.

Tables 3 and 4 record the number and percentage of students who were absent for 10 or more days during term 1 2001 and indicate that the number and proportion of students with a significant rate of absenteeism increases from years 6 to 10. The differences in gender rates are mostly insignificant.

**Table 5: Indigenous students percentage attendance rates term 1 2001**

Sector	Primary	High School
<b>Indigenous Students</b>		
% Average Attendance	93	88
Average Days Absent	3.5	6.0
<b>Total Students</b>		
% Average Attendance	96	93
Average Days Absent	1.9	3.2

Information has been collected to allow a comparison between the attendance of Indigenous and non Indigenous students. This is required by the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program agreement with the Commonwealth.

Indigenous students on average were absent twice as many days in term 1, 2001 compared to all students in primary and secondary schools.

**Table 6: Number and percentage of Indigenous students absent for 10 or more days of schooling term 1 2001**

Sector	Primary	High School
<b>Indigenous students</b>		
Number of Students	35	35
Percentage of Students	7.0	16.8
<b>Total students</b>		
Number of Students	431	547
Percentage of Students	2.0	5.3

Table 6 shows the percentage of Indigenous and total students who were absent for 10 or more days during first term 2001. The rates for Indigenous students were more than three times higher than for all students.

Through the support of the Indigenous Education Unit, attendance of Indigenous students has continued to improve significantly, from an average of 31 days absent per year in 1998 to a projection of 19 days for 2001.

The results of the first collection are summarised below:

- average high school absenteeism is about one and a half times that of primary students;
- absentee rates increase through the high school years;
- there are around 1000 students missing more than 20 per cent of their schooling;
- there is no gender difference in attendance rates; and
- Indigenous attendance is improving but it is double the rate of all students and there is a higher proportion with significant absences.

### 3.5 Attendance comparisons with other states

NSW provides an annual attendance analysis to each school, comparing the school to its district and to the state. Comparative information gives gender breakdowns and figures for the previous two years. Schools are required to include the analysis in their annual reports.

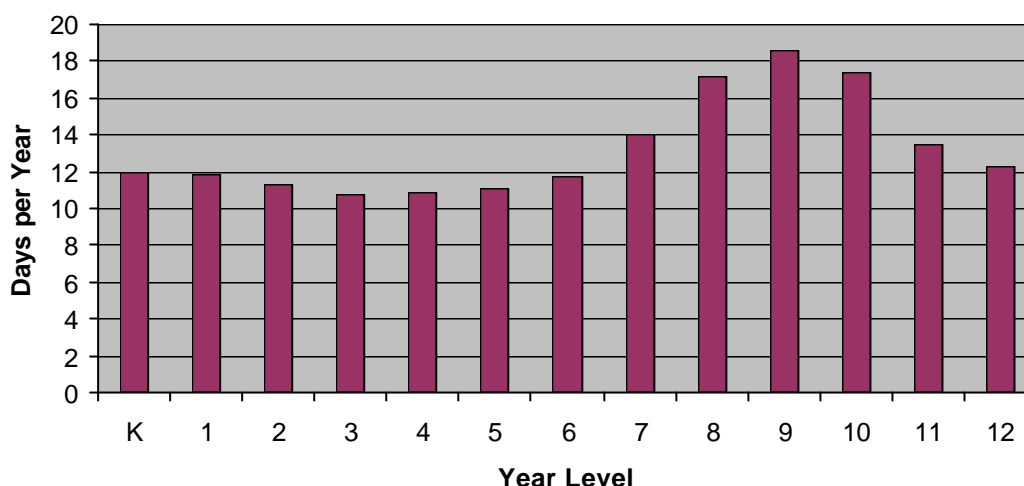
Victoria publishes a set of benchmarks that will in the future provide a basis for comparison with ACT statistics. In Victoria system statistics are compiled from aggregated data using annual school absence totals and census enrolments. Indigenous comparisons are calculated from school returns for the school year up to 30 November.

As an indication of available data and possible areas for comparison information from Victoria is given below. The latest available information from Victoria is that for 1999.

**Table 7: Percentage attendance in Victorian schools 1999\***

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Percentage Attendance	93.9	94.0	94.2	94.5	94.5	94.4	94.0	92.8	91.2	90.5	89.1	90.9	91.3

**Figure 2: Average days absent in Victorian schools in 1999\***



\* Reproduced from Benchmarks 1999, School Management, Victoria DEET

Attendance rates were similar in South Australia in 1999 where the average rate in primary schools was 93.7 per cent and for secondary schools 90.6 per cent (Rothman 1999).

**Table 8: Percentage attendance in South Australian schools 1999\***

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Percentage Attendance	92.6	93.4	93.8	94.3	94.2	94.2	93.7	93.3	91.4	89.8	89.6	90.7	91.6

\*Derived from Rothman 1999

The attendance rates in other jurisdictions exhibited similar patterns to the ACT with attendance rates declining slightly over the high school years and absenteeism rates very similar for males and females. The average attendance rate for Indigenous students was lower than for the total population. In other states there was also a significant difference in attendance rates by socioeconomic status (SES).

### 3.6 *Future directions for the student attendance monitoring project*

Council believes that the new project will mean a substantial improvement in the collection of consistent information across the system and should provide a firm basis for school and system strategies.

The data collection process will now operate each term and information will be collated annually to provide the fullest picture for schools and the system. A report of school and system results will be produced and each school provided with its own statistics in comparison to the system averages. Schools will be able to review their own data as needed.

### 3.7 *Conclusions*

Council identified early in its inquiries that ongoing system attendance data and benchmarking was needed to support schools in implementing strategies to assist students 'at risk'. The new Student Attendance Measurement Project in ACT Schools, when fully implemented will address this need. It should be continued.

At present, system level data collection from ACT schools is at an early stage of development and full year data is not yet available. In particular the term 1 data does not include the winter period when absence rates may be expected to increase.

The preliminary information appears to show that annual rates of absence in ACT are likely to be similar to those in Victoria. Information on the numbers and percentage of students with significant absence indicates that this level of absenteeism is an issue for ACT schools. Indigenous student absence rates are an acknowledged cause for concern and it is a primary activity of the Indigenous Education Unit to work with schools, students and parents/carers on this issue.

This is important because attendance procedures based on effective monitoring and follow up will have both preventive and remedial outcomes. Follow up procedures that are properly and promptly employed can prevent habits of absenteeism from developing.

The example of Victoria (Appendix 1) and our investigation of best practice overseas have indicated to us that there are three key elements in effective attendance procedures:

- a clear published policy and process for enrolment and attendance;
- efficient record keeping, analysis and reporting; and
- efficient follow up procedures which may include sanctions.

The need for a system policy statement on school attendance was acknowledged in discussions with principals. The statements should emphasise the importance of good attendance for successful outcomes from schooling, including parents'/carers' and students' obligations regarding school enrolment and attendance and the legal requirements of attendance. The Department of Education should also publish summary attendance data and analysis annually.

Schools should evaluate significant local factors in attendance patterns and address these issues. They should report, possibly in school board annual reports, on initiatives adopted by the school to promote regular attendance and to address any factors identified as locally significant in improving attendance.

Council believes that the Department should require schools to have a clearly stated and agreed school board policy on the recording, monitoring and follow up processes related to attendance. The policy should be part of the documentation of the school and should be communicated to students, parents/carers and staff at least annually.

The policy should include a clear indication when parents/carers will be notified of their child's absence and the process and provision for the induction of a persistent non attender back into the school, for example, buddy, significant teacher, make up work. Council recognises that many schools already have excellent policies and procedures and for this reason the departmental attendance policy should be broad and nonprescriptive.

Many schools already employ a process that includes reporting absence records to parents/carers routinely, meetings with students and parents/carers with a school counsellor, home visits, and the development with students and parents/carers of a plan that addresses issues impeding attendance. All parents/carers and students should be fully aware of these procedures.

Council urges the department and schools to work towards the situation where it becomes common practice for parents/carers to inform the school of their child's absence from school on or before the absence. Once this practice is in place, it may be feasible for schools to phone the parents/carers of absent students who are absent without reason.

Council was also informed by principals of inadequacies in tracking students as they move between schools and school sectors. It considers that the lack of a systematic transfer process needs to be addressed. The Student Attendance Measurement Project may partially address this but, if not, the reintroduction of a formal transfer certificate will need to be considered.

## 4 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PERSISTENT ABSENTEEISM

The identification of factors contributing to persistent absenteeism is fundamentally important to any effort to improve individual and overall school attendance. This chapter focuses on the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage, family and personal factors, and school based factors. Given the differences between individuals and the circumstances that impinge on them, no list of factors can be seen as the complete set nor are any of them necessarily mutually exclusive. Often these factors appear to interact, compounding the effects of each.

### 4.1 *Socioeconomic disadvantage*

Social disadvantage is present to a significant degree in the ACT although its extent is less than in other regions of Australia. The Poverty Task Group (2000) estimated that nearly 26,000 people in the ACT are in poverty. This comprises an estimated 16,000 adults and almost 10,000 children. Children face a higher risk of being in poverty than adults.

A clear link between social disadvantage and persistent absenteeism has long been established in the literature (Reid 1999, p48, see also Stokes and Walton 1999, p76). Council understands that it is normal for many students from a variety of social and educational backgrounds to develop a fear of either attending school or failing once there. Sometimes these fears can be reinforced by illness, falling behind in school work, unpopularity with peers, inability to participate or do well in activities. The crucial issue is that “students in a situation of disadvantage are more likely to miss school if a difficulty arises there, or if another option that is more attractive than going back to school is available to them.” (Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Training 1999)

Frequently children in such family environments have low self esteem and fail to develop appropriate strategies to deal with anger and other problems (House of Representatives 1996). This is at the same time as the family’s ability to provide support for their school aged children can be compromised in this environment of disadvantage.

However, only a minority of pupils from lower socioeconomic groupings become persistent absentees. For example, a South Australian study has shown that around 40 per cent of the difference in student absence rates is attributable to student background (Rothman 2001). Council agrees that “The home, social and economic factors are only part of a complex phenomenon” (Reid 1999, p45).

It is often difficult for teachers to appreciate the full extent and influence of disadvantage on their pupils. The daily lifestyle of these students highlights the need to recognise that young people are not a homogenous group. Council agrees that failure to recognise this is to fail some of these students.

## 4.2 *Family and personal factors*

There is a significant link between family factors and persistent absenteeism (House of Representatives 1996). A British study (cited in Milner and Blyth 1999, p16) observed that the likelihood of persistent absenteeism is increased by two to three times in families characterised by 'weak' parental/carer supervision and 'low' family attachment. O'Keeffe (1994) identifies a connection between high levels of absence and adverse family dynamics.

Many studies (for example, Reid 1999, p47) on attendance have reported that the parents/carers of persistent absentees:

- Tend to display anti education values;
- The father, the mother or both were themselves persistent absentees; and
- Tend to make fewer visits to the school than the parents/carers of good attenders.

There is research to show that parent/carer-condoned absence is a significant factor contributing to persistent absenteeism from school (Munn and Johnstone 1992, Reid 1999). This is supported by anecdotal evidence received by Council in regard to ACT Government schools. Some parents/carers may condone persistent absence from school because of chronic illness in the family, their attitude to the worth of education and to avoid conflict with adolescents.

Many studies show that illness or disability in the family which requires children to act as carers to parents or siblings is a significant factor in contributing to persistent absenteeism. An ACT study (Gays 2000) found that 10 per cent of students in a Government school and 12 per cent of students in a non Government school self-identified as performing a caring role in their family. The study noted that schools are often unaware of the impact of disability or illness on students' family life. About two-thirds of these students in the Government high school were female.

Often parents/carers may condone school absence because they do not see the importance of regularly attending school, are themselves disaffected with the school and/or see a need for children to help at home or to work to assist the family business.

Some parents/carers may feel angry with the school because of what they perceive as a lack of understanding of their children by the teachers, or a lack of achievement by their children. These parents/carers may find little reason to cooperate with the school about attendance. This in itself is a problem of the school and the family developing a cooperative effort to solve the absenteeism problem.

However, Bradshaw (1998) indicated in some cases it appeared that parents/carers had little or no control over whether the children went to school and simply wrote notes to cover their children's absences. Recent studies are beginning to show that some parents/carers are desperate to ensure their children attend school regularly but they are unable to do so and claim that they are at their 'wits end' and desperate for help. The physical and emotional confrontation that sometimes occurs within households over persistent absenteeism and related school issues can be the cause of major family disruption (Reid 1999, pp47,48).

A group of persistent absentees exist which are referred to as school refusers. They tend to be students suffering severe emotional upset. The Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training (1999, pp29,30) has found that parents/carers often consent to the absence of school refusers. It found that it was sometimes difficult in these cases to ascertain whether parents/carers are being oversensitive to their child's demands, have separation difficulties of their own, or are simply 'worn down' by the constant battle to get their child to attend.

The House of Representatives inquiry (1996, p47) identified two groups of young people as being more vulnerable than others to the danger of persistent absenteeism. These are children in temporary or long term care including those living in shelters, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Children who live in residential care or another form of out-of-home care are some of the most disadvantaged children in our community. According to a study cited in the House of Representatives inquiry (1996, p47), the Victorian experience is that:

- More than half of the children in care are below average in literacy, numeracy levels, personal development, social skills, emotional and behavioural development, have a diagnosed disability (physical, behavioural, social and/or intellectual);
- Almost half have frequent episodes of persistent absenteeism; and
- Less than 10 per cent of them receive additional education support.

Indigenous young people were reported to the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry as having participation rates which are generally lower than for the population as a whole. The absentee rate increased as the students moved through secondary school. The ACT data supports this contention.

A number of contributing factors to this higher rate of absence by Indigenous students have been identified by the House of Representatives (1996, p52) inquiry which Council believes may apply in the ACT context:

- Failure of schools to cater for different cultural backgrounds and value systems;
- Language/literacy needs;
- Entrenched poverty and welfare dependence;
- Inappropriate school structures and teaching styles for those students who need a less structured and more personal approach to learning;
- Need for broader, more flexible curriculum; and
- Lack of parental/carer support and appreciation of the value of education.

### 4.3 *School based factors*

It is now recognised that it is not sufficient to attribute poor attendance solely to socioeconomic background, individual circumstances, family or community/cultural factors. School factors are a major contributor to absenteeism.

“Historically, the search for causes of non attendance has focused on the individual and family factors, the ‘pathology’ model retaining an important place within official contemporary discourse of ‘truancy’...

By the early 1980s, though, research on school effectiveness having demonstrated the strong relationship between disruptive behaviour and persistent non attendance and the organisation and ethos of particular schools, irrespective of their pupils and their pupils’ families, the focus of attention has shifted substantially to the impact of the education system and schools.” ( Milner and Blyth 1999, p18).

A range of studies in Australia and overseas on the cause of absenteeism indicate the primary importance of school based factors. They include school organisation and climate, bullying and harassment, curriculum, teaching practices, lack of achievement at school, student/teacher relations and teacher attitudes to some groups of students.

The House of Representatives Inquiry (1996, p37) identified several school based factors as contributing to persistent non attendance operating in Australia such as irrelevant curriculum, lack of pastoral care, inadequate transition support and poor school culture. A study of year 5 and 6 students in several Hunter Valley primary schools shows a strong link between student perceptions of the quality of their school life and absenteeism (Leonard, Bourke and Schofield 1999, 2000). A range of studies on the causes of non attendance by Indigenous students in Australia indicate the primary importance of school based factors (Bourke et al 2000, p19).

In the ACT, the Legislative Assembly inquiry into students ‘at risk’ of not achieving satisfactory education and training outcomes heard evidence that the practices of schools can have a negative impact on students and lead to absenteeism and early leaving (2001, pp10,21).

These findings are supported by many overseas studies. A UK study which looks at student’s own accounts of non attendance reports that the school curriculum and the desire to avoid some teachers were important factors behind persistent absenteeism (O’Keefe 1994). Similarly, research on absenteeism in Scottish schools has suggested that schools themselves may be part of the problem (Malcolm and Thorpe 1996, Boyd 1999). Other studies that report the relevance of school factors include Bryk and Thum (1989), Bos, Ruitjers and Visscher (1992) and Corville-Smith et al (1998).

It is important to recognise that school based factors may well account for the wide variations in absenteeism between schools that appear to have similar intakes. For example, in their study of persistent absenteeism among Indigenous students, Bourke et.al. (2000, p24) state:

“...schools differ widely in their attendance levels independently of the age groups they cater for, and that these differences are related to the quality and relevance of the schooling they provide.”

#### 4.3.1 *School organisation and climate*

The House of Representatives Inquiry found evidence of negative aspects of the structure and size of schools on school attendance (1996 pp31,33). A Western Australian study found that students persistently absent expressed concern about the size of the school and that the school's structures and timetabling policies prevented them from participating in subjects they wished to pursue (Oerlemans and Jenkins 1998).

At the most general level, the organisation of a school as a system of authority with rules and discipline can be an alienating experience for students with a different background. As a British study found:

"...the school is an extremely important experience as it is the first real insight into organised society. It is the symbol of the community at large, with rules and regulations, hierarchies and tensions between different sources of power. It comes to represent the official world. 'Dropping out' of school has, therefore, great social implications. One particular world, public, rule-bound and organised, is rejected for an alternative." (Cullingford 1999, p56)

Oerlemans and Jenkins (1998) found that that students who were persistently absent did not perceive school rules as an expression of the values and norms of the school or as a system of protecting students from harm. The authors suggest that this is because school use rules in a negative sense, the emphasis being on discipline, rather than using rules for the promotion of a sense of community.

The climate of some schools may also alienate students. An expectation that students should be made to fit the existing structures and procedures may lead students to avoid school. An oppressive environment leads some to avoid school where possible. Reid (2000, p25) observes that "truancy breeds and develops in climates of hostility, fear, negativity and low expectations".

For many students who most need support, schools are not sanctuaries but appear as threatening and alienating places. The Western Australian study by Oerlemans and Jenkins (1998) found that students who were persistently absent perceived school to be an unfriendly and hostile environment.

"These students felt that they did not belong to the school. The school was not seen as a place they wished to attend. The image conjured up by the students' opinions is one of a school that is not meeting student needs, but that it is also not listening to the students, perhaps does not know how to listen to the students, or how to interpret what these students are saying."

A South Australian study by Trent and Slade (2001) reports the views of adolescent boys that schools often push them into a downward spiral of disaffection, resistance, resentment, anger and retaliation that, for many, is just too hard to stop. The boys surveyed stated that schools expect adult behaviour but don't deliver an adult environment and that schools talk about fairness, respect and a celebration of difference but produce the opposite in practice.

In evidence to the ACT Legislative Assembly, Galilee stated that students are leaving school early because of alienating practices, structures and rules (ACT Legislative Assembly 2001, p27). Nearly 50 per cent of high school students participating in school review in 2000 did not consider their school to be a friendly place (ACT Department of Education and Community Services 2000, p23). In contrast, college was seen as a friendly place by 90 per cent of year 11 students and 77 per cent of year 12 students (p36).

Schools that attempt to accommodate the needs of a diverse range of students in a caring environment appear to have better attendance rates.

#### 4.3.2 *Bullying and harassment*

Council is using the term bullying as inclusive of such behaviour as verbal and physical harassment, racial intolerance and slurs and similar peer behaviour.

Bullying is widely reported in overseas studies as a factor in persistent absenteeism (Learmonth 1995, Social Exclusion Unit 1998, Reid 1999, Cullingford 1999). Reid (1999, p323) states that all forms of bullying can have an adverse effect on students and lead to attendance problems. This includes general harassment, name-calling and teasing as well as more violent behaviour. However, he also notes (2000, p59) that surveys show considerable variability between schools in the strength of this factor in contributing to non attendance. In some schools, bullying can be the main factor in the cause of persistent absenteeism but in other schools the link is almost non existent.

In Bradshaw's (1998) study of NSW schools, bullying was commonly cited as affecting daily attendance. Bicknell (1999) found that bullying in the Victorian schools studied was the main reason for non attendance.

In the ACT, evidence was recently tendered to the Legislative Assembly that there are particular groups of students who are harassed at school because of their beliefs, racial background or sexuality and that this affects their successful participation in the education system (ACT Legislative Assembly 2001, p10). About half of all parents/carers have reported that their child has experienced harassment at school (ACT Department of Education and Community Services 2000, p19).

#### 4.3.3 *Curriculum and teaching practices*

The curriculum may be a source of discontent for many students. For many young people, school does not seem to have any particular relevance. For example, a study of persistent absentees in a Western Australian secondary school has found that these students questioned the relevance of some of the subjects they were doing and "...did not feel that the school was meeting their needs right now" (Oerlemans and Jenkins 1998). Generally they were unable to make a connection between their school learning experiences and what they would do in the future.

Persistent absentees generally report school to be boring (for example, Malcolm and Thorpe 1996). The House of Representatives Inquiry (1996, p33) recorded that constant reference was made, particularly by young people, to boredom, disruptive behaviour and rejection. This often resulted from rigid academic curricula which are pointless for some students, irrelevant to their current and intended lifestyles and too difficult for others. Bicknell (1999) found that after bullying the most important cause of disaffection and poor attendance appears to be dislike of lessons and of teachers. These views were confirmed recently by a South Australian study which found that adolescent boys in Government and non Government schools view school work as boring, repetitive and irrelevant (Trent and Slade 2001).

There appears to be a significant level of student dissatisfaction with aspects of the secondary school curriculum and teaching practices in the ACT. According to the School

Development and College Review Report for last year (ACT Department of Education and Community Services 2000), many high school students and their parents/carers are dissatisfied with the learning program in their school. About 40 per cent of students stated that classes were not interesting and a similar proportion of parents/carers were not satisfied that schools provide appropriate programs to meet particular needs of students (p17). Nearly 50 per cent of high school students stated that teachers do not always explain things clearly in classes (p19). The high school results were similar in 1999 (ACT Department of Education and Community Services 1999a).

An ACT Legislative Assembly report has drawn attention to issues of inflexibility and unsuitability of the curriculum for adolescent students 'at risk' (ACT Legislative Assembly 2001, p67). It also reported studies conducted at the University of Canberra which indicate that young people who experience difficulty with schooling fail to find the curriculum relevant to their needs (pp21,2).

Fragmentation of the content of the curriculum into separate 'subjects' and 'units' is often accompanied by these being taught by specialist subject teachers particularly in secondary schools. Many teachers of young adolescents reported that their students' learning is inhibited by the fragmentation of the curriculum particularly in the movement from primary to secondary school (House of Representatives 1996, p36).

Another issue is the relationship between teaching practices and the general lives of students and their families outside school. An ACT study (Shopen and Liddicoat 1998, 2000, Shopen et.al. 1999) points to a mismatch between literacy and numeracy practices of schools and those that some groups of students and their families use in their lives outside school. For example, a school may give high status in its literacy program to literature and creative responses which is at odds with a home environment that uses literacy for information and a basis for action. Schools that do not make links with or value the literacy and numeracy practised at home may find that school becomes irrelevant for some students.

#### 4.3.4 *School failure and self esteem*

Persistent absentees often have serious problems with literacy and numeracy and are inclined to develop low academic self esteem. Research has shown that as pupils fall behind their peers in terms of literacy and numeracy levels, they are likely to fall further and further behind as they grow older. Because these pupils spend less time in school they receive less help with their learning needs (Reid 1999, p106).

Bicknell (1999) found that constant failure is the reason for much misery among young people at school and affects self esteem and confidence. This is exacerbated if combined with tension between the cultural expectation of the school and students' cultural expectation of the school and their cultural heritage.

The sense of failure may be combined with a feeling of not being wanted. Such students often develop a sense of exclusion and alienation with school. Students in these circumstances question why they should submit to a sense of humiliation when they can absent themselves. They develop a sense of exclusion within class and the school that is easily transformed into physical absence. Such experiences often combine with a lack of success and bad relations with some or most teachers. One British study of delinquency and persistent non attendance points to the lack of confidence and vulnerability among some

students as a reason for self-assertive aggression which leads to problems with other students and with teachers.

“It is their sense that they are ‘picked’ on and therefore humiliated in a personal way. The reason for this is that they feel ‘stupid’, that they are exposed as being ‘shown up’ as failures. Not all these young people were bad at school, and they all cite particular subjects at which they did well and which they enjoyed. But it is a part of the culture of the school, reinforced by legislation, to have assessment targets, competition and rank orders. All pupils, at some time or another, will feel embarrassed, or worse, at doing less well than their peers. In the culture of the classroom, pupils are aware of their own performance in relation to each other. One central reason for avoiding school, then, is the avoidance of a sense of failure, of being found wanting.” (Cullingford 1999, p63)

Some pupils who are already socially excluded for whatever reason are having their educational disadvantage compounded by actions taken by schools. Some students are ‘fed on a regular diet of failure in school’ (Reid 1999, pp54,55). Research in the USA indicates that students who occasionally skip particular classes can be making a personal judgement as to the worth of a class or classes. Other students not coping academically and feeling unconfident or embarrassed in a particular class making a ‘rational’ short or long term decision not to attend. Such absences can increase the difficulty of coping in class and the pupils will make increasing ‘rational’ decisions to be absent from classes where their peers and teachers perceive them to be having difficulty (Gabb cited in Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Training 1998, p18).

Such findings are reinforced by those of many studies of early school leavers. Leaving school early is the next stage from a pattern of non attendance by disaffected students. For example, a major Australian study (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000) found that lack of educational success and personal satisfaction and belonging are significant factors contributing to students leaving school early.

In the ACT, the results of the Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Program indicate a significant group of students in the high school years who are not achieving the educational success of their peers in literacy and numeracy (ACT Department of Education and Community Services 2001). In 2000, 17 per cent of year 7 students and 33 per cent of year 9 students performed at the lowest level of the literacy profile for those years. These average results disguise even more serious problems in key aspects of literacy. For example, 19 per cent of year 7 students were at the lowest level in reading and 23 per cent of year 7 students and 41 per cent of year 9 students were at the lowest level in writing language and content.

In numeracy, nine per cent of year 7 students and 22 per cent of year 9 students were at the lowest levels of the respective year profiles. However, 16 per cent of year 7 students and 30 per cent of year 9 students were at the lowest level in measurement and data sense and 27 per cent of year 9 students were at the lowest level in number sense.

#### 4.3.5 *Student/teacher relationships*

Trent and Slade’s (2001) study of the views of boys in South Australian schools found that they consistently see their continued attendance and achievement at school primarily in terms of their relationships with teachers. The primary factor influencing their attitudes to school is that there are too many unsuitable teachers who ‘don’t like kids’ and who create or exacerbate their problems. The study states:

“All of the boys, to varying degrees, resent what they see as largely ineffective, out of date teaching by people who they think cannot teach, shouldn't be allowed to teach, have lost interest in teaching, lack knowledge and skill and who are unnecessarily, inequitably, inconsistently, and usually unsuccessfully, authoritarian and who waste their time.” (p28)

Similar views were found among persistent absentees in a school in Western Australia by Oerlemans and Jenkins (1998). The study found that students felt that they could not approach teachers with their problems, that they would be ignored or told to ignore it. Another Australian study by Leonard, Bourke and Schofield (2000) found a strong negative correlation between absenteeism and relationships with teachers.

In the ACT, over 40 per cent of high school students feel that teachers do not understand them and are not satisfied that teachers are treating boys and girls the same (ACT Department of Education and Community Services 2000, p17). Research carried out in high schools for the Department of Education (Colmar Brunton Social Research 2000) found that students gave high priority to having teachers who avoid stereotyping and use a teaching style that fosters mutual respect between teachers and students. However, students considered that there was a large gap between their expectations and performance in this regard.

Cullingford's (1999) study of persistent absentees in the UK reveals that many such students feel a sense of exclusion at school and that the school and the staff are indifferent to them, that some teachers don't care about them. This sense of exclusion and indifference is easily formalised by not attending.

As social institutions, schools need rules and these rules are conveyed and enforced through individual teachers. Students in difficult and stressed situations may resent taking orders and lack of self esteem gives rise to aggressive behaviour towards particular teachers. This leads to bad relationships which can be avoided first by not attending particular classes and then by not attending school.

Teachers often see difficult students as the product of particular backgrounds and form low and negative expectations of such students. This compounds lack of self-confidence and self esteem and also leads to poor relationships and aggressive behaviour.

Life in the classroom may be much easier if problem students are not present and pressure to ensure regular attendance may not be as strong as it should. Reid found in his research that many teachers seem only to punish poor attenders rather than attempt to reintegrate them. He found in his British study that few schools have appropriate reintegration strategies for persistent absentees. The cumulative effect of this was to increase student alienation towards schools, lower their academic self concept and general levels of self esteem and worsen their behaviour when they do return to school (Reid 1999, p54).

#### *4.4 Conclusions*

The research literature clearly demonstrates that persistent absenteeism is not a simple phenomenon. Individual, family, socioeconomic deprivation and school based factors are interwoven into a network of dynamic influences which affect school attendance.

In the past, persistent non attendance was frequently attributed to family and personal background. However, modern research indicates a clear relationship between school based factors and patterns of non attendance. School based factors can exacerbate and

compound the effects of social disadvantage and family and personal circumstances on attendance. All three major influences interact in different and complex ways to cause persistent non attendance. As the Scottish Office (2000) recently stated:

“...in most cases the problem lies somewhere in between. In other words, when we look for causes of truancy we can't just blame the pupil, nor is it just the home, nor just a teacher or the school, but very often a combination of all three – in other words interaction between home and school and pupil and teacher.”

For many non attenders, avoidance of school seems a rational response to the circumstances they face at school - whether it is a sense of alienation from school, bullying, failure at school work, boring classroom work, or constant quarrels with teachers and/or other students. Non attendance is a way out, not a positive choice but a negative one as a result of a series of experiences at school.

On the other hand, schools that provide a caring and happy environment for all students, a curriculum and learning strategies that engage students and cater for a diverse range of student needs tend to have high attendance.

Council's research into the factors contributing to persistent absence from school, the evidence relevant to the ACT and its own consultations suggest that the following factors contribute to persistent absence from school in the ACT:

- socioeconomic disadvantage and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background and related issues such as homelessness;
- parent/carer condoned absence from school is an issue as is the number of students who have to care for parents and siblings;
- negative or non supporting attitudes of some parents/carers to school;
- schools are not seen as friendly places by a significant number of high school students;
- a small group of students may experience serious harassment and bullying;
- curriculum and teaching practices are a source of much student dissatisfaction in high schools and colleges;
- lack of success at school in some aspects of literacy in secondary school;
- student/teacher relationships in high schools.

Council notes that the Standing Committee on Education, Community Services and Recreation of the ACT Legislative Assembly (2001) found a similar range of factors contributing to adolescents and young adults leaving school early. Persistent absenteeism tends to lead to early leaving of school.

These factors suggest that a comprehensive approach to improving school attendance should encompass four broad features:

- Appropriate social welfare and general community support mechanisms are available and accessed by families and students in need.

- A range of student welfare, behavioural and learning support mechanisms are available in schools and the school system to assist individual students.
- All students are provided with learning opportunities that are stimulating, worthwhile and relevant to them, recognise their individual learning needs and take place in a caring environment.
- Programs are in place in all schools to develop and maintain close home/school partnerships, particularly with parents/carers of 'at risk' students, to support attendance and learning.

The first two features are discussed in the following chapter on support mechanisms and the last two are discussed in chapter 6 on school improvement strategies to establish the conditions for good attendance.

## 5 SUPPORT MECHANISMS

### 5.1 *Introduction*

The ACT Government provides a wide range of support mechanisms that directly or indirectly bear upon attendance issues in schools. These mechanisms address aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage, family and personal difficulties and student support in schools. This chapter provides an overview of school based programs and measures, programs operated by other agencies and new initiatives of the Government. The material is intended as illustrative of the main mechanisms and does not purport to be a comprehensive listing of relevant Government programs.

In reviewing the support mechanisms, Council attempted to relate these programs to the factors that directly or indirectly contribute to persistent absenteeism and assess how the programs contribute to addressing these factors. Council was concerned to identify any significant gaps in the range of support mechanisms, programs that were not being fully utilised or areas where the demand for services was greatly in excess of available resources.

Council has focussed on school based mechanisms and other programs that have a close connection with schools rather than the broad range of government programs supporting families.

### 5.2 *School based mechanisms*

School based mechanisms include general in-school measures, special in-school measures that are not available in all schools and system programs that directly or indirectly relate to attendance issues. They are directed at many of the factors which contribute to persistent absenteeism considered in the previous chapter.

#### 5.2.1 *In-school mechanisms*

Council's discussions with principals and senior counsellors indicated that schools have developed many in-school support mechanisms for persistent non attenders. The provision of support varies between schools and between sectors. Primary schools mainly provide support through their roll teacher (usually the class teacher), school counsellor, special needs meetings, and the school executive. Secondary schools have the added support of the roll marking/advisory group teacher, welfare support teams, (often overlooked by an executive teacher) and year coordinators/advisers.

Schools have developed a variety of programs and processes to support non attenders, help in the identification of the underlying cause and remediate the cause. Meetings with individual and groups of students, nurturing friendship groups, peer support, attention to issues of bullying and harassment, individualised learning programs, parent/carer support including programs for better parenting/caring, remediation in work missed, home visits, development of re entry plans are just some of the mechanisms used by schools.

In addition, all Government schools provide students with the opportunity to access counselling services. School counsellors attend schools from half a day to five days per week depending on the school enrolment. The role of counsellors is to assist students, parents/carers and teachers with issues that affect students' educational and personal development, many of which also affect student attendance patterns. Many schools also operate student welfare teams that provide support and assistance to students particularly 'at risk', including those who have poor attendance. A range of anti-bullying/harassment programs are also operated by schools.

The adequacy of school counsellor time allocation needs evaluation. Counselling allocations to schools are enrolment-based. Council has noted that the projected staffing of counsellors for February 2002 provides for a secondary school of 600 having 2.5 days a week counselling, a primary/secondary school on two sites having 5 ¼ days per week for its 1,234 students, a primary school of 400 having 1 ¾ days per week and one of 100 having half a day per week. Council is aware that schools can use staffing points to "buy" extra counsellor time, if counsellors are available.

Council considers these examples of counsellors' time allocation raise the issue of the need for an expansion of the schools counselling services. All students need strong connections with adults, preferably several, in their learning, social and personal development. The current allocation of counselling staff means that many are overloaded and many students cannot gain the everyday assistance they need. In this regard, the Council has noted the finding of a high level national education commission report in the United States earlier this year:

"The latest data that the Commission was able to obtain indicate that the average guidance counselor in the United States is responsible for providing career, academic, and often, personal advice to about 500 students. It stretches credulity to believe that a single counselor can advise more than a small fraction of this caseload." (National Commission on the High School Senior Year 2001a, p24)

Council supports a review of counselling needs in ACT Government schools.

Primary and high schools have access to resources to provide special learning assistance to students falling significantly behind their peers in their literacy, numeracy and organisational learning and skills. This is supported by the ACT Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Program designed to identify the learning needs of individual students.

Identified learning needs in key aspects of literacy in high schools and in upper primary should be addressed. These needs may arise from a lack of resources, or the quality of the programs or other reasons. Council made no judgement in this regard but does point out that such learning needs could be a serious contributor to persistent absenteeism and need to be addressed. Council notes that:

- the suitability of learning assistance programs for students in the upper primary years has been challenged (Shopen and Liddicoat 2000);
- there has been little improvement in the proportion of qualified staff in the program in recent years, especially in high schools (McRae 1997, Stefaniak 2000); and
- issues have been raised about the extent to which learning assistance points are effectively utilised in high schools (McRae 1997).

Council considers these claims should be investigated.

Suggestions have also been made to provide special learning assistance measures in colleges to students who need assistance with literacy, numeracy and organisational skills. Council believes these suggestions should be considered, especially since the expansion of vocational education and training courses has not been sufficient to maintain retention rates to years 11 and 12.

The High Schools for the New Millennium program operates in each ACT high school. Its aim is to bring about high school change by increasing the relevance and effectiveness of schooling for adolescents. It involves new approaches to teaching and learning and a range of proposals for improving school organisation and management. High schools are being supported in their efforts to change their organisation and practices to better meet the needs of students. Council understands that the funding available to each school of \$20,000 per year over three years will need to be well targeted to make any lasting change.

Vocational and training programs have expanded in ACT Government colleges in recent years to increase the opportunities available to students, including those who might not otherwise attend regularly or complete school. This is complemented by work experience programs and pre-vocational courses offered in high schools to prepare for college vocational courses.

Many schools have also adopted their own special programs directed at the learning and personal development needs of 'at risk' students, including those who are persistently absent from school. Several of these programs provide an alternative learning program and settings for students who are not experiencing success in a mainstream learning stream. The programs include the Ginninderra Alternative Program (GAP) at Ginninderra High School, the Youth Focus Program at Melrose High School, the Youth Initiatives Project at Lyneham High School and the FAST Program at Charles Conder Primary School. Some schools are working in partnerships with youth centres in their region.

These programs are relatively new and Council believes it is important that data be collected on their operation in order to analyse the contribution they make to improved attendance and learning outcomes. Students and parents/carers should be closely involved in assessing what works for different groups of students and in the further development of these programs. Opportunities for interaction between the staff involved in these programs should be provided as a means of assessing progress and to refine their operation.

### 5.2.2 *System measures*

Council has been advised by the department of a number of system programs and support services which are available to assist students in special settings. They provide for students with a variety of problems which may or may not include persistent absenteeism. Programs which are significantly related to absenteeism include:

- The Indigenous Education Unit which works closely with indigenous students in schools and has itinerant teachers who work with students. As noted in chapter 3, there has been a recent decline in absenteeism amongst Indigenous students

- Northside and Southside High School Student Support Centres based at the Belconnen and Tuggeranong Youth Centres. Each is staffed by a full time teacher and a youth worker who work intensively with small groups of students 'at risk'. They provide individual education and development programs in a non school environment for students who require short term intervention.
- Alternative programs are offered at Dickson College (Alternative Education Program) and Canberra College (the Eclipse Program) for students 'at risk'. These programs provide places for up to 100 students from years 8 to 12 for whom mainstream school arrangements are unsuitable. They provide a more flexible learning setting which caters for individual learning style.
- The Adolescent Day Unit provides for students between the ages of 12 and 15 who have emotional or behavioural difficulties that prevent their attendance at school. It aims to integrate students back into the mainstream school system or prepare them for work programs. It provides services to a small number of students for twenty weeks at a time.

The primary and secondary principals' associations claim that support for students with serious behavioural problems is inadequate (ACT Legislative Assembly 2001, p35). The waiting times are often very long, especially for placement in some of the withdrawal units and there may be limitations to the effectiveness of both the withdrawal units and the itinerant support provided. Suggestions have been made for more places in withdrawal units and placements for longer periods. The difficulties with the current arrangements for supporting students with behavioural problems has been acknowledged by the Department of Education and Community Services (ACT Legislative Assembly 2001). Council believes there is a case for current approaches to be evaluated.

### 5.3 *Role of other agencies*

Effective support for students facing personal and family issues that are preventing attendance or presenting serious impediments to learning requires active cooperation between schools and other support services. The roles of Children's, Youth and Family Services, community organisations and the police are reviewed below.

#### 5.3.1 *The role of Children's, Youth and Family Services*

The Bureau of Children, Youth and Family Services is involved in providing support through its general programs for children and families in need.

There are a number of programs to assist and support young people (see Appendix 3). However, principals have claimed that for the most part the Bureau of Children's, Youth and Family Services does not respond to requests for assistance for persistent absenteeism.

Schools have found Youth Connections to be very useful. Youth Connections provides an inter agency support service based on youth workers who work closely with individual students 'at risk'.

Services of the Indigenous Youth Centre will be enhanced to include an Indigenous High School Support Centre.

### *5.3.2 The role of community organisations*

The department through Family Services purchases places for students in care at the Galilee Day Program.

Support of Learning for Life expands a successful Smith Family program which supports disadvantaged young people to participate more fully in education and recreation.

### *5.3.3 Involvement of police, penalties for families and students*

The department and the Australian Federal Police have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that establishes protocols to value and support youth and assist professionals in the joint performance of their duties.

The Memorandum of Understanding provides a basis for school and police cooperation in working with young people. However, the police are not involved with absentee students in the ACT unlike in other jurisdictions (NSW and Victoria) where they may transport apparently truanting students to schools or to a centre.

The penalties available in the legislation have not been enforced for sometime. Where child neglect is a factor then a court may use powers under the Children's and Young Persons Act to provide appropriate care. The new Education Bill removes a punitive approach to absenteeism by students, but retains penalties for parents/carers.

## *5.4 New initiatives*

Council has been advised of further developments in the provision of support services, including those with outside agencies.

A College Action Research Project on Student Retention, which began in early 2001 is investigating the circumstances of students who did not complete years 11 and 12 in the last cohort and then developing strategies with Colleges to address the issues identified. The 2001-02 ACT Budget provided \$839 000 over four years to support students 'at risk' of early school leaving and those with poor attendance patterns obviously come within the scope of the 'at risk' category.

The Schools as Communities Project was started in 2000-01. It aims to strengthen links between local communities and schools and will link families with health, community and education services. It includes specific initiatives for children 'at risk'. It provides additional support, including home/school liaison, targeted at eight schools identified as with higher needs.

An Early Intervention Student Management Program will complement the Schools as Communities project. It will allow schools to address student management issues better. The program emphasises early intervention and professional development for teachers.

The Department recently introduced a new resource for parents/carers known as ParentLink. This initiative provides a confidential telephone information, advice, guidance and referral service available to anyone who cares for children, from babies to teens.

An Out of School Education Program for young people who have left mainstream education is to be expanded. The program offers young people an opportunity to re-engage in education in a non threatening, flexible and informal environment.

Another new initiative in the 2001-02 ACT Budget is the allocation of \$950 000 over four years to support young carers to enable them to succeed in education. The aim of the initiative is to raise awareness of young carer issues with schools, professionals, community and government services. It will assist with a brokerage program that supports young carers in their education by providing such assistance as additional tuition and school materials as well as support in addressing their responsibilities, accessing counselling and other matters.

The Department of Education and Community Services is developing an action plan (entitled *Within Reach Of Us All*) for the achievement of educational success for all students. The plan aims to strengthen partnerships with agencies, schools and community groups to improve transitions between education, employment and training activities for young people. The plan is relevant in coordinating and directing effective support mechanism for students 'at risk' and for providing the framework for a preventive strategy.

## 5.5 Conclusions

In chapter 3, it was shown that there is a group of students in ACT Government schools who are persistently absent from school. These levels of absence remain despite a wide range of school based and system programs, complemented by interventions by other agencies, to provide support services for students 'at risk'.

Persistent absentee students continue to be at serious risk of not achieving satisfactory school outcomes as a result of their regular absences.

It may be asserted that there will always be a group of students who do not identify with learning in mainstream or alternative education settings and will not attend school regularly, for whatever reason. Whatever the truth of this assertion, Council is of the view that society should continue to explore ways of encouraging and supporting regular attendance, especially by providing satisfying learning experiences for these young people. To do otherwise is to deny the obligation to provide all students with the learning needed to effectively participate in adult society and to impose severe costs on society in terms of unfulfilled potential, future anti-social behaviour and increased welfare provision.

Existing support mechanisms are assisting students 'at risk'. There is a comprehensive range of support services available and Council did not perceive any major gaps in the range available. However, there are indications that the level of resources is not adequate to meet the demand on their services. High demand for the services of a program without the requisite resources generally leads to a degradation of services.

Council also emphasises that well targeted and adequately staffed and funded support mechanisms are not sufficient to address all the factors that contribute to persistent

absenteeism from school. The research evidence also demonstrates that responses must also be designed which address issues relating to school organisation, ethos, curriculum, teaching practices and home/school relationships. These issues are discussed in the following chapter.

#### 5.5.1 *School support mechanisms*

Claims have been made by organisations representing principals, teachers and parents/carers in government schools that resources do not match the demand on services in several key areas and programs that influence student attendance at school. They include:

- school counselling services;
- learning assistance in the upper primary, high school and college years;
- high school development support; and
- alternative education programs and settings in secondary school years.

Council was not able to assess these claims in detail but it believes that a case exists for the Government to undertake a thorough consideration of them.

#### 5.5.2 *Non school based support mechanisms*

Council notes that there is a wide range of support services available through non-school agencies. However, some are quite small in terms of staffing levels that can be funded with the resources available and questions exist about their ability to deliver services to a large number of students and their families. For example, the research findings indicate a number of characteristics for these services if they are to be successful. The characteristics are:

- That they are voluntary such that participation is not seen as a penalty and stigma is avoided.
- There is effective coordination between agencies.
- There is choice and flexibility in delivery, so that programs can respond to individual students and readily adapt to changing demands.
- Services are also adapted to students' cultural background.

The issues that Council believes should be taken up, particularly as the new services are developed and implemented, are those of ensuring that schools are aware of the role of each service, how they are accessed by the school and/or individuals and ensuring that there are effective links and coordination between agencies.

Council believes that it would now be timely to develop a statement, available to schools and parents/carers as well as service providers, which sets out the role of each service in a strategy directed at ensuring that all students achieve a full education. The new plan, *Within Reach Of Us All*, may provide a suitable vehicle.

It is also important as these services are developed, that opportunities presented by projects, such as School as Communities are fully taken up to ensure that there are effective links between agencies so that schools and agencies working together becomes a routine feature of service delivery.

## 6 STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE

Council subscribes to the belief that the long term effect of not thoroughly endeavouring to address persistent absenteeism compounds the problem for individual students. It is also seen as contributing to a perception among students that absence is acceptable to some degree (Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Training 1999 p11).

It also acknowledges that overcoming persistent absenteeism is not an easy task. Nonetheless, the interests of our student population dictates that all partners in the education process must do everything possible to ensure that all factors which impinge on each student are controlled so that the best possible educational outcomes are achieved.

Council's report has its essence based in its contribution to developing effective schools "Effective schools have higher levels of attendance than underperforming schools" (Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Training 1999 p6).

### 6.1 *Improving attendance*

Policy makers at both the department and the school level must consider positive and proactive strategies to promote regular attendance amongst the whole school community. Raising the profile of attendance issues and recognising good attendance are two strategies which in the past may not have received full consideration.

The key elements in developing effective attendance procedures are discussed in chapter 3. This chapter also recognises the need for both the system and schools' to develop agreed attendance policies. Bardsley et al (1999) have in Council's view, provided a worthwhile summary of "the essential elements of an effective attendance policy".

While these elements would need translation to fit in with the philosophy and content of schooling in the ACT, they may prove a worthwhile beginning to stimulate discussion in the development of attendance policies.

### 6.2 *Conditions related to successful intervention*

Any intervention to improve attendance assumes the collection and monitoring of individual and overall school attendance information. Council initiated the development of a project to collect attendance data at the school and system level. The development, refinement and introduction of this system (detailed in chapter 3) enabled Council to respond to the first term of reference of this inquiry. It also provided the data needed to develop intervention strategies.

Tasmanian research shows that schools can reduce absences by making it harder for students to miss school without being caught (Victoria, Department of Education, Employment and Training 1999 p15). Schools need to nurture a culture in which teachers, parents/carers and students agree that absence is only acceptable where a sufficient reason exists.

Council's research has indicated that these strategies should emphasise the primacy of teaching and curriculum practices, the development of flexible school structures and organisation, early literacy and numeracy teaching student centred education, parent/teacher/student relationship and parent/carer and community involvement in schooling.

A report produced for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme in Australia, Brooks et al (1997, pp74,76) reviewed a number of school based initiatives from across Australia and concluded the following factors are related to successful interventions:

- caring, supportive and holistic approach to student welfare;
- skilled and dedicated staff;
- flexibility in responding to the individual needs of all students;
- focus on individual success and development;
- low student/staff ratio;
- encouraging individual responsibility;
- parent/carer involvement;
- professional development of staff;
- removal from school environment for a period; and
- early intervention.

These are aligned to the four critical areas defined by Dwyer et al (1998, p6):

- the way in which young people are treated;
- the nature of the courses on offer;
- institutional flexibility in delivery of courses; and
- the support structure, especially for those with the most negative experiences in providing both initial and ongoing support.

### 6.3 *High school improvement*

The pattern of persistent absenteeism in ACT schools, which is particularly evident in the high school years, and the research on the contribution of school based factors to such absenteeism provide a very strong case to put greater emphasis on high school development to improve the relevance and meaning of education at this level for all students. The proportion of high school students who report that high schools are unfriendly places, where they do boring or irrelevant school work and where the teachers do not understand them points to a continuation of high school improvement as a major priority.

In addition, issues about high school development continue to arise in the community. For example, the ACT Legislative Assembly report (2001, p31) concluded:

“...there is a need to totally review the current appropriateness of the high school system and its relevance to students in the twenty first century.

Issues such as the transition between primary and high school, the relevance of the curriculum, the structure and culture of schools, how to best deal with year 9, how to ensure an inclusive and accepting culture, whether the middle school concept needs to be more widely implemented, all need serious consideration.”

Council acknowledges that high school improvement is a difficult and challenging task, especially in circumstances where there is significant student dissatisfaction, low staff morale and parent/carer indifference. However, the gap between expectations and performance in key areas of high schools is such that an enhanced program of realistic change based on agreed principles is an immediate priority for the ACT government school system and should not be delayed.

This is not to deny the considerable efforts that are being devoted to high school improvement already. The role of the High Schools for the New Millennium Project was acknowledged earlier. Notwithstanding the contribution of this program, Council is aware that principals, staff and boards of many schools are concerned to implement organisational and cultural change and several have succeeded.

Council recommends that a systematic program for further high school improvement be formulated around several key principles and priorities for change. It should incorporate widespread discussion of these principles and priorities themselves. Although, at this stage, Council's focus is on high school improvement, it considers that this process could easily be adapted to include issues of college improvement. Council's key principles and priorities for change follow.

### *6.3.1 Principles for high school improvement*

Council considers that several broad principles would provide a sound foundation upon which to build a high school improvement program to address the issues raised in chapter 4. These principles have been gleaned from a review of a range of reports and material on aspects of high school improvement (for example, ACT Department of Education and Community Services 1999, American Youth Policy Forum 2000, Cumming and Owen 2001, Education Queensland 2000, 2001, National Commission on the High School Senior Year 2001a, 2001b).

The principles recommended by Council are:

- schools establish a friendly and caring learning community whose goals are to provide all students with successful learning experiences as well as activities and supports to guide adolescent development;
- schools recognise the importance of adult support in a student's life and ensure that each student has a positive relationship with at least one caring adult but, hopefully, many, in the school;

- schools recognise that every student can achieve and has talents and abilities that can be nurtured and developed with appropriate supports in school and without;
- schools provide learning opportunities that are student centred and contextual, integrating problem based and real world experiences into the curriculum and teaching;
- students are empowered to participate in the design of their learning experiences; and
- partnerships between the school system and the community should be developed to ensure that all students have access to networks to support their learning and growth through adolescence.

Each of these principles is briefly explained as follows.

A fundamental principle is that Government schools aim to provide all students with positive and successful learning experiences that encompass academic or classroom learning and personal growth. Formal school learning cannot be treated apart from the personal and social development of students. This is particularly the case in high schools where students are growing through adolescence to young adulthood.

Part of the job of schools is to guide adolescent development. They should help students meet the challenge of adolescence and young adulthood through a series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent.

Each school should have a positive approach to address the broader development needs of adolescents rather than just focus on youth problems as they relate to behaviour and attendance. Such an approach seeks to meet adolescent development needs and build competencies rather than viewing students as problems. Opportunities for personal growth should be provided to all students, using the resources of the community to help meet the vast range of needs of adolescents.

Maintaining a climate which is friendly and caring for all students, which is conducive to student learning and personal development and, ultimately, where students want to be, should be a fundamental priority. Schools should create a culture whereby teachers and other staff respond to students in a way that conveys a sense of trust and affection and that they care about students.

Teaching involves establishing social relationships and not only must teachers be properly qualified in their area and have appropriate teaching skills but they must have the ability to relate to and support young people in their learning and development. A teacher's job is not simply to teach in front of a class but to establish, with the support of the rest of the school, the Department of Education and Community Services and the community, a creative learning environment when young people are supported and cared for.

At the most general level, high school improvement means ensuring sufficient adult contact and support for every student through a critical phase in their learning and personal development. High school students thrive in an environment of strong, supportive and encouraging relations with adults and the first step in maintaining such an environment is an

adequate number of adults. Students should be surrounded with caring and competent adults to help them navigate the challenges of learning and the stages of adolescence.

Providing effective adult support for all students also depends on how schools are organised, their values and objectives, the expectations of students, the nature of the curriculum and teaching practices as well as the variety of student support measures discussed in the previous chapter.

The school culture should support a belief system that every student can achieve and has talents and abilities that can be developed with appropriate supports in school and without. It should hold high expectations for all students. Schools and staff should have an expectation that all students will go on to successfully complete year 12.

Teachers must appreciate the diversity of backgrounds of students, understand that their development needs vary widely. The culture of students determines how they perceive life and their relationship to the world and it therefore plays a strong role in shaping learning styles and their reaction to classroom settings and activities. For persistent absentees, there is often little continuity between schooling and the rest of their lives.

Teachers should have the pedagogical skills to encompass and draw on the various approaches students use to learn in order to provide relevant and effective learning experiences. They must be able to make connections between the key learning areas of the curriculum and the lives of their students at home, school and work. They must be able to engage any student at a particular stage in his/her intellectual or social development and lead them to the next stage.

Classroom activities must be structured to give each student successful learning experiences through problem posing and solving activities that have real world value. Accomplishment in real problem solving is a key ingredient in improving self image in learning. A learning environment that offers encouragement, praise and opportunities for such accomplishment will promote a positive approach to learning and improve education outcomes.

Curriculum relevance is extremely important for student engagement and attendance. The school has a clear framework for the curriculum linking academic content to real world experiences and issues of relevance to students. Real world experiences and issues should be integrated in the curriculum and classroom activities. Learning opportunities in the community should also be integrated into course work.

Students should be empowered to be involved in decisions about their learning and activities in school and not be viewed as passive recipients of services decided on by adults. Students should be actively involved, with the guidance of teachers, in setting curriculum objectives and learning goals at each stage of high school, problems and issues to be considered in learning activities and how their work should be assessed.

The principle of establishing partnerships between schools and parents/carers and the community is discussed separately below.

### 6.3.2 *Priorities*

The main priorities recommended by Council for an enhanced high school improvement program are to:

- provide regular professional and community forums on high school improvement;
- appoint additional staff to high schools;
- expand the High Schools for the New Millennium Project and central office support for the project;
- introduce new accountability arrangements for the use of additional funds;
- review the year 10 certificate;
- revise the curriculum frameworks and provide additional support for curriculum development in high schools that is relevant to student needs and integrates learning opportunities in the community;
- support the extension of effective teaching practices, with greater recourse to real-world problems and issues and community learning activities, and align those practices with curriculum, assessment and reporting; and
- training on adolescent development and support be included in pre-service teacher training.

These priorities do not necessarily constitute a comprehensive approach to high school improvement. For example, the middle school model, the role of educational leadership in schools and the role of vocational education at the high school level are not further considered. However, Council believes its proposals are key priorities to address the issues raised in chapter 4.

### 6.3.3 *Additional high school staff*

The previous ACT Government pledged additional funding to government high schools in the way of reducing class sizes in years 7 and 8. Certainly, implementation of the above priorities will require extra funding. This should halt and reverse the movement of students of high school age to the non Government sector.

Council emphasises that the provision of additional funds is not sufficient on its own to generate the change that is necessary. High school improvement requires change in a variety of ways, including school culture and organisation, curriculum relevance and meaning, teaching practices and teacher/student relationships. Without a program to address these issues, Council believes that extra funding would be a waste of resources and would fail to improve student engagement with school or improve attendance.

An increase in teachers and other staff should provide the opportunity for high schools to review their operations to build more positive and caring relationships with students. It may be that if schools are given some flexibility in deciding how extra resources can be best employed, they will be able to deliver better outcomes and support students 'at risk'. Council

believes that schools should negotiate the priorities for change in conjunction with their parent/carer community and the Department of Education and Community Services.

#### *6.3.4 Forums on high school improvement*

Council believes that the principles of high school improvement should continue to be widely discussed in schools and the community. This is important as a means of developing greater consensus about the need for, and direction of, change. It also is important to generate ideas for practical change by drawing on the experience of teachers, administrators, academics, parents/carers and others involved in the learning and development of adolescent and young adult students.

Council recommends that forums on high school improvement be regularly convened to exchange ideas and experiences, discuss proposals, promote change and review outcomes of change. The form that discussions take could vary from professional workshops and study circles to public forums to test ideas and proposals. These gatherings will help in communicating the achievements of the Project to date and in the future.

It is important that public forums be open to a wide range of people (especially present and immediately past students) and that the outcomes of the proceedings be published on the department's website. The success of such a process is critically dependent on the active recruitment of participants with diverse backgrounds and views and does not become a meeting of 'like minds' with no 'value added' by the process. Similarly, the reporting of outcomes is critical to ensuring ongoing constructive discussion.

#### *6.3.5 High Schools for the New Millennium Project*

Council also supports an expansion of High Schools for the New Millennium Project. This project is already offering a fruitful path for schools to devise and trial forms of cultural and organisational change. The attainment of better attendance outcomes in high schools will depend greatly on the project. For this reason, Council urges Government to provide additional funding to expand the central office resource team. This could take on responsibility for the proposed ongoing forums on high school improvement.

As part of this Project, Council also supports the use of small research grants on high schools in the ACT. For example, greater knowledge about the attitudes of disaffected students may contribute to the design of programs and support measures to better engage them with ongoing learning. These research grants should be subject to submission and be open to academics, teaching staff and relevant education research organisations.

#### *6.3.6 Accountability*

Reporting on innovations and their outcomes over time should be obligatory. Such reporting provides a basis on which to ask questions and facilitate ongoing assessment of change.

Council recommends that accountability arrangements include formal reporting on quantitative and qualitative indicators of change and professional review and evaluation of innovations.

Council believes that the indicators for general reporting on high school improvement should be kept to a small list of key indicators such as literacy and numeracy results, key competency outcomes, suspensions and exclusions, attendance and other broad indicators. For specific projects, more detailed indicators may be necessary to evaluate outcomes but these should be developed as part of the formulation of projects.

Council also supports complementary systems of accountability. It does not believe that formal reporting on quantitative and qualitative indicators should be the only form of accountability on high school improvement. In addition, to formal reporting on agreed indicators, Council recommends the use of high status system forums or workshops in which the work of individual schools is presented and subject to peer review and professional appraisal. These forums should be open to staff from other high schools, departmental representatives, university staff and other members of the community. Council believes such an approach would contribute to the development of enthusiasm for change and innovation and a sense of teacher autonomy in managing change.

#### *6.3.7 Year 10 Certificate*

Council believes there is good reason to review the requirements of the year 10 certificate as a record of achievement of students. To some extent the current status of the year 10 certificate reflects the 'in-between' nature of the high school years.

The high school years should not be seen as a matter of marking time until the crucial college years but as making a critical contribution to the learning and social development of adolescents. Council suggests that the record of achievement in those years should reflect the broad outcomes and competencies achieved by students over these years as well as serve as a record of formal learning achievements. A review of the requirements for a year 10 certificate should generate discussion about and help articulate a clear statement of the role and purpose of high schools for teachers, students and parents/carers.

#### *6.3.8 Curriculum relevance*

The literature review in chapter 4 emphasised the importance of curriculum as a factor in persistent absenteeism. The ACT curriculum frameworks were developed nearly ten years ago and Council believes a review of them should be initiated as soon as possible to incorporate new developments and to ensure relevance to today's circumstances and student needs. Council recommends the introduction of a structured review of curriculum frameworks and courses over a cycle of a five-year period similar to that recently adopted by the Board of Senior Secondary Studies for colleges.

The school curriculum should define the objectives and outcomes it expects at each stage and it should link academic content to real world application and context. It should also reflect cross-curriculum perspectives in an integrated manner at each year level. To this end, Council suggests that the curriculum review aspect of school development should be upgraded and involve outside curriculum development support.

There are difficult issues concerning the demand for relevance and how it relates to key areas of knowledge and skills that young adults are expected to develop. Pedagogical practice

should be supported by curriculum frameworks and school curriculum that provides flexibility to engage alienated students as well as high achieving students.

There is a clear need to develop some greater flexibility in high school organisation and the curriculum to incorporate programs that can reengage alienated students in a learning community. Students should have the opportunity to experience learning in the community, through work-based learning opportunities, service-learning or volunteer activities. Experiences from these community learning opportunities should be integrated into the school curriculum and coursework and supplement class work.

High schools will need curriculum development support from central office to ensure that each school achieves the change necessary. There is also a need for central office support to develop and implement quality learning modules for students 'at risk' in high schools.

### 6.3.9 *Teacher training*

The current level of student dissatisfaction about teaching points to an overwhelming need to improve classroom practice in high schools. There is little chance of improvement in outcomes and attendance of at risk students and persistent absentees without changes in classroom practices.

Similarly, it will be difficult to modify the much cited student behaviour problems in any substantial way without such changes. Student dissatisfaction, failure at school and poor relations with teachers and other students are intimately related to classroom practice. Effective student behaviour management is dependent on productive classroom practice.

A priority is to give more attention to connecting student work with their background and real world issues and problems outside the classroom to better engage 'bored' and 'at risk' students.

The New Basics Framework trialed in a large number of Queensland primary and secondary schools in recent years is a particularly relevant model of an integrated framework for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment implemented to improve education outcomes for all students. It is based around problem solving and community learning experiences and allows community members, teachers and students to work together to ensure that the richness and relevance of students' academic and social growth is enhanced. The New Basics Framework incorporates:

- a series of 'Rich Tasks' activities for students across three-year spans that have real-world value and use to students;
- curriculum planning and delivery involving four new areas of cross-disciplinary learning; and
- systematic introduction of effective pedagogical practices in the classroom.

In 2001, the ACT Department of Education and Community Services' funded a pilot project as part of the High Schools for the New Millennium Project based on the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study and the New Basics Framework. About 50 teachers were involved

in the professional development program and approximately 600 year 9 students participated in the program.

Council believes this has much potential to support change in classroom practice, introduce more relevant learning activities and experiences and help encourage more democratic relationships between students and teachers. The classroom tasks developed in the project were problem based, cross curriculum, related to the world outside the classroom and involved a range of skills and competencies.

At this stage the evaluation of the pilot has not been completed, but if it proves to be successful Council would support its development as a comprehensive professional development program available for all teachers. In particular, all high school teachers should be encouraged and supported to participate in the program. Council acknowledges this is a long term task and that schools should have the resources to facilitate staff participation.

Using this program to introduce more effective pedagogical practices in high schools will necessitate changes in curriculum and assessment to ensure that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and reporting are fully aligned and consistent. This is also a long term process involving appropriate resources to support the necessary change.

Council also believes that changes need to be made to pre-service secondary school teacher training to provide greater emphasis on pedagogy and training in adolescent development. Council recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services initiate discussions with university training departments to this end.

#### *6.4 Parent/Carer participation*

As noted in chapter 4, parent/carers' absence is a significant factor in persistent absenteeism and may occur because parents/carers do not see the value of regularly attending school. They are disaffected themselves with the school, they have little influence over what their children choose to do and because of chronic illness or disability in the family. It was also noted that mismatches between school and home culture or approaches to learning, particularly in regard to literacy and numeracy practices, may generate alienation and poor student outcomes for some groups.

The principles of parent/carers' participation in schooling and the learning of their children are fundamental to improving attendance at school and outcomes for students 'at risk'. It is important for pedagogical, social and democratic reasons.

Building strong partnerships between teachers and parent/carers can contribute to more effective teaching practices. Effective teaching involves building on the existing knowledge and understandings of students and their culture of learning. It necessitates an understanding of the different learning approaches and needs that students bring to the classroom that is facilitated by regular dialogue with parents/carers about their children's learning. Teachers need to work in partnership with parents/carers so that the cultures and experiences of students and of the groups of which they are members become a constructive part of the knowledge and understandings developed through classroom activities. It provides an avenue for reducing mismatches between home and school learning cultures and better integrating different learning experiences.

Parent/Carer involvement in children's learning at home also provides for better educational outcomes and attitudes towards school. There is a large body of research that demonstrates a strong positive connection between parent/carer involvement and student achievement (for example, Henderson 1988, Henderson and Berla 1994). Students show improvement in academic outcomes, attitudes and behaviour, are more engaged in classroom activities, have higher attendance rates and lower suspension rates.

When parents/carers show an interest in their children's education and maintain high expectations for their performance, they are promoting attitudes that are critical to achievement - attitudes that can be formed independently of social class or other external circumstances. Schools can help by providing helpful information and skills. The studies show clearly that parent/carer involvement, whether based at home or at school and whether begun before or after a child starts school, has significant, long lasting effects. In fact, these effects vary directly with the duration and intensity of the parent/carer involvement: the more, the better.

It is extremely important to remember that the converse is also true. If schools treat parents/carers as unimportant, if they treat them as negative educational influences on their children, or if they discourage parents/carers from becoming involved, then they promote the development of attitudes that inhibit achievement at school (Henderson 1988, pp150-1).

The research clearly indicates that parent/carer participation offers great benefits in terms of improving outcomes for students 'at risk'. It shows that children who are farthest behind their peers make the largest gains under parent/carer involvement programs (Henderson and Berla 1994, OECD 1997).

Council's previous research (MACGS 2000) demonstrated a wide variety of ways in which ACT Government schools seek to promote parent/carer involvement in student learning and in school activities and decision making. Since then the Community Partnerships Section of the Department of Education and Community Services has been working on developing a system policy and action plan to support parent/carer participation. The action plan covers the establishment of an information/resource database on parent/carer participation, promotional material on the benefits of parent/carer information, suggestions and assistance for schools and professional development for teachers on parent/carer participation. A research project (Supportive Practices for the Enhancement of Literacy Learning – SPELL) has also produced a professional development kit to support partnerships between home and school in the middle years of schooling.

In terms of the future development of parent/carer involvement in student learning, Council has determined several priorities. These are:

- development of a system program to support parent/carer involvement in literacy and numeracy learning;
- improved communication and reporting to parents/carers;
- in-service training for staff on developing parent/carer participation; and
- appointment of home/school liaison officers in all high schools.

#### *6.4.1 Parent/Carer involvement in literacy and numeracy development*

Parent/Carer involvement in the literacy and numeracy development of their children is widely accepted as being a critical factor influencing literacy outcomes yet there is very little in the way of a system approach or resources to support such involvement. School approaches to involving parents/carers tend to be 'ad hoc' and rely on the dedication of a few teachers and volunteers with the result that it is often difficult to involve the parents/carers of students who could most benefit from a more systematic approach.

Council supports the development of programs designed to develop a real partnership between home and school in literacy and numeracy learning. It recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services review the experience of other states with a range of programs designed to increase parent/carers involvement in literacy and numeracy learning with a view to developing expertise and training in this area. It notes that the Talk to a Literacy Learner Program (TTALL) and its secondary school counterpart, Effective Partners in Secondary Literacy Learning (EPISLL), are specifically designed to work with parents/carers of 'at risk' students and that some teachers in the ACT have been introduced to these programs.

The development of parent/carers involvement in literacy and numeracy learning should be closely integrated with the Learning Assistance Program and the implementation of School Literacy Plans.

#### *6.4.2 Reporting and information for parents/carers*

Maintaining effective lines of communication is one of the most basic elements of supporting home-school partnerships. Parents/Carers and teachers operate in different contexts around children's learning and view the child from different perspectives. Regular communication and sharing of information can serve to bridge the two contexts and perspectives in the interest of better learning outcomes and decision making in schools.

In order for parents/carers to actively support and participate in their children's learning they need to have regular and effective reporting on their child's progress in all aspects of learning at school. Parents/Carers also need readily accessible information about school policies, programs and teaching practices.

Council notes that the draft Education Plan for 2002-04 proposes several initiatives to improve reporting to parents/carers. It commends these proposals.

#### *6.4.3 Training for parent/carers participation*

Building the capacities of administrators, principals and teachers to work effectively with families is a prerequisite for improved home/school relations and strengthening parent/carers participation. Part of this is developing understanding about the role of parents/carers in schools and the need for effective partnerships.

Teacher training programs can include general information on the benefits of and barriers to parent/carers involvement, information on awareness of different family backgrounds and

lifestyles, techniques for improving communication between school and home, information on ways to involve parents/carers in helping their children learn.

Council notes that the draft action plan on parents/carers as partners in schooling being developed by a representative working group includes provision for professional development on parent/carer participation. Council supports the inclusion of such a module in the professional development program.

#### *6.4.4 Home School Liaison Officers*

Home School Liaison Officers can help create an effective relationship between home and school to support children's learning. They can liaise with teachers on behalf of families and students; assist in the organisation of homework; help parents/carers assist the learning of their children, provide information about the school and its programs. They may also provide advice on parenting/caring and assist families to gain the support they need from other community and government agencies.

Home School Liaison Officers could also play an instrumental role in following up on poor attendance and helping students who are persistent absentees back into some form of learning program. Such a role could significantly raise awareness about the importance of regular attendance in school communities. It is important, however, that such a role should be carefully designed so that home/school liaison officers provide support and assistance for students and their families and do not become 'de facto' truancy officers and the confrontational approaches this could involve.

Council supports the appointment of a Home School Liaison Officers in every high school and every primary school that serves a community with a relatively high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. An initial step towards this goal would be to establish a few pilot projects to establish good practice principles and procedures.

#### *6.4.5 Community partnerships*

Council's previous report on school/community links (MACGS 2000) pointed to the significant role that general community involvement with schools and student learning can play in supporting students and schools and in achieving better outcomes. Council believes that such involvement can also contribute to improving attendance by providing for a greater range of real world learning opportunities that can be integrated into the curriculum and by providing additional support mechanisms for students who do not attend school regularly. It supports the sentiments expressed in a recent US report:

"...the learning experience for teens must use all of the resources that a community has to offer. School administrators and teachers must engage others in the community in the enhancement of the education and development of teens. This new concept of a learning experience for youth must recognize that there are multiple teachers and caring adults and resources available throughout the community that can be drawn on to strengthen the learning experience in ways that neither schools nor community agencies alone could accomplish." (American Youth Policy Forum 2000, p19).

The ACT Government school system has developed extensive links with the community and various community organisations and in this they are supported by a variety of Government funded programs. Community organisations are used to deliver part of the curriculum and to

supplement the learning experiences of students. In recent times, the idea of partnerships with other community organisations and businesses has developed and received recognition and new initiatives have been introduced. Community based learning is part of the program of many schools and community members serve as volunteers in many schools.

Council supports the continuing efforts of the Department of Education and Community Services through its Community Partnerships section and other programs to extend school/community links.

## Appendix 1 Interstate legislation and practice

All states and the Northern Territory require schools to keep attendance records. Attendance is usually recorded at least twice a day and records are open to inspection. All jurisdictions include powers to obtain information about children not attending school through a welfare officer or an "authorised person".

All states and the Northern Territory also collect absenteeism and other information compiled from attendance records. Analysis varies with most providing average daily attendance statistics with some additional information (sex, year level, reasons for absence etc). In some cases there are issues with data validity.

Victoria provides an example of how the use of data is integrated into a strategy to reduce absenteeism. Victoria has a state wide system from which school attendance statistics are collected, monitored and reported. School data are analysed and state, regional and like school mean, 75<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> percentile data is presented by year level.

Schools monitor their attendance records against the appropriate self selected benchmark, guided by the publication *School Management Benchmarks 1998*.

The benchmark indicates when absence is becoming a problem requiring intervention at the student, school and system levels. For example, an early indicator that a student requires support may be that absenteeism is at or above 12 days per year.

There are five strands to the Victorian strategy for tackling absenteeism in schools. They are as follows:

- a clearly stated and agreed policy;
- monitoring and follow up procedures;
- if necessary continually following up with parents/carers;
- welfare support including:
  - breakfast programs
  - nurturing friendship groups
  - peer support
  - intervention by school support officers
  - attention to issues such as bullying; and
- individual focus:
  - individualised curriculum
  - cooperation between school, parents/carers and counsellors.

## **Appendix 2 Children's, Youth and Family Services Bureau programs to assist and support young people**

The following programs assist and support young people:

- The Supporting Families with Adolescents program establishes a pro-active, early intervention program for families with adolescents who are experiencing family conflict and/or dealing with issues such as substance abuse.
- Youth Connections provides an inter-agency support service based on a Youth Worker who works closely with individual students 'at risk'. Youth Connection Family Support, provides support to some of the most 'at risk' ACT families, through provision of counselling and support services.
- Services of the Indigenous Youth Centre will be enhanced to include an Indigenous High School Support Centre.
- The Recreation Support Program for at Risk Youth is a community-based program to provide accessible sport, recreation and support programs for 'at risk' youth.
- A Young Carers Package assists with a brokerage program to support young carers in their education.

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