02
School improvement outcomes across Queensland state schools
Trying to build the strongest house on poor foundations can only serve to compromise the integrity of the completed structure. The same can be said about education. Even the very best leadership practices, learning and teaching processes, learning environments, and school and community partnerships will not improve student achievement unless the right foundations are in place.

These fundamental elements are necessary for successful student learning and include attendance, behaviour and school community satisfaction. When these are in place, student achievement, specifically in literacy, numeracy, Year 12 attainment, and closing the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, are more likely to result.

Accordingly, this chapter focuses on these preconditions and outcomes of successful student learning. The relevant National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data, and other survey data for all Queensland schools or all state schools, are provided in relation to each element. The qualitative data, drawn from the 2015 school reviews, are then presented.

Descriptions of each of the elements discussed in this chapter are realised using a mixed mode that draws on the quantitative and the qualitative data from the reviews. Owing to the different nature of and purposes for which these datasets have been prepared, they cannot be used to provide any simple comparison to each other, nor can the informative qualitative data be considered as fully representative of all state schools. However, in combination, both these datasets can provide a fuller and richer picture of what is happening within Queensland state schools.

Student attendance and engagement is a necessary precondition for positive student learning outcomes.

### 2.1 Attendance

Attendance rates provide a key performance indicator for a number of national agreements, such as the National Education Reform Agreement, and are regularly used as a proxy for student engagement. Self-evidently, student attendance and engagement is a necessary precondition for positive student learning outcomes. More than a decade of research indicates a direct correlation between attendance and school success within the context of a range of other factors (Gottfried 2011; Hancock et al. 2013; Morrissey, Hutchison & Winsler 2014).

Domains 1 and 3 of the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) (Australian Council for Education Research [ACER] 2012, pp. 2, 6) set out the essential components of a school-based approach to student attendance that contributes to an explicit improvement agenda and a school culture that can effectively promote learning:

> ...the school communicates clearly that it expects all students to learn successfully and has high expectations for student attendance, engagement and outcomes; ...the school promotes and maintains an environment reflective of its high expectations that all students will learn successfully.

Parental responsibility in relation to their child’s enrolment and attendance at school is set out at s. 176 of the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006. Specifically, each parent of a child who is of compulsory school age must ensure that the child is enrolled at a state school or non-state school; and that the child attends the school, on every school day, to participate in the educational program for which the child is enrolled, unless the parent has a reasonable excuse. ‘Attendance’ requires the child to comply with the school’s requirements about physically attending, at particular times, its premises or another designated place (s. 177 of the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006). Failure to comply with this legal obligation is an offence and may result in a monetary penalty.

The Department of Education and Training (DET) aims to improve student attendance through the statewide Every Day Counts initiative, which was introduced in 2008. This initiative seeks a shared commitment from students, parents, caregivers, schools and the community to its four key requirements:

- All children should be enrolled at school and attend on every school day.
- Schools should monitor, communicate and implement strategies to improve regular school attendance.
- Truancy can place a student in unsafe situations and impact on their future employability and life choices.
- Attendance at school is the responsibility of everyone in the community.
Fact sheets, policy and planning tools, case studies and promotional materials are available to schools on the Every Day Counts website, and aim to help schools improve school attendance. Every Day Counts promotes a constructive five-step approach to addressing and discouraging student absenteeism:

- develop a positive school culture
- communicate high expectations of attendance
- record and follow up student absences
- monitor student non-attendance
- provide intervention and support.

### Attendance facts — 2015

The overall 2015 state school student attendance rate increased by 0.3 per cent to 91.4 per cent.

The increase in student attendance occurred across all regions, with Far North Queensland region reporting the largest increase of 0.6 per cent between 2014 and 2015.

The attendance rate for Indigenous students increased by 0.5 per cent to 84.9 per cent, leading to a narrowing of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 0.3 per cent to 7.1 per cent.

Attendance for Year 7 students in 2015 (now part of secondary school) remained steady when compared to Year 7 students in 2014 (when part of primary school).

The proportion of low attendees (students below 85 per cent attendance) has fallen in 2015 by 1.1 per cent to 16.3 per cent.

Student absences increased as each semester progressed, with the final week of each term having the most absences. More absences occurred on Mondays and Fridays.

### 2.1.1 Attendance measures

There is overwhelming evidence that absenteeism from school can have a significantly negative impact on young people’s future prospects and social development. On any given day, an average of nine per cent of Queensland’s state school students are absent from school. If this statistic was true for each student it would equate to each child missing more than one full year of schooling from Prep to Year 10.

Schools have guidelines to address chronic absenteeism, school refusal and truancy. In many cases, schools may need to involve other agencies, including the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, and other local non-government organisations, in order to assist students and their families.

Departmental policies and procedures on attendance, absences and roll-marking continue to provide guidance to all schools on improving attendance. These policies are supported by data collected within the OneSchool system. For state school student attendance rates in recent years by DET region, see Table 2.1. For attendance by benchmarks and year-level category, see Table 2.2.
By region and remoteness

An increase in state school student attendance occurred across all regions, with Far North Queensland region reporting the greatest increase of 0.6 per cent between 2014 and 2015. However, Far North Queensland and North Queensland regions have higher proportions of low attendees than other regions.

Non-Indigenous student attendance rates have shown minimal variation across remote, metropolitan, provincial city and rural areas over the years. Rates have been more varied for Indigenous students, with those in remote areas showing significantly lower attendance than their counterparts in metropolitan, provincial city and rural areas.

2.1.2 Attendance practices in review schools

Although conceptualised within this report as an important contributor to school achievement rather than an end in itself, of the 369 schools reviewed during 2015 by the School Improvement Unit (SIU), approximately one-third had prioritised attendance within their improvement agendas. The improvement strategies of around 15 per cent of review school reports included the implementation of improved attendance strategies.

Both research and departmental data (see above) indicate that attendance is more likely to be an issue within secondary schools than primary schools (Hancock et al. 2013). Similarly, review schools that had attendance as a priority either within their current improvement agenda or as a key improvement strategy, including the adoption of clearly defined policies and procedures, tended more frequently to be secondary schools.

The importance of attendance was reflected across school review reports, and was raised in terms of:

- the importance of student attendance
- use of data in defining and addressing attendance
- school strategies to address attendance; in particular, the importance of parent support and communication
- indicators of success.

Of the 369 schools reviewed during 2015 by the SIU, approximately one-third had prioritised attendance within their improvement agendas.

By Indigenous status

The 2015 results (see Figure 2.1) show an encouraging increase in the attendance of Indigenous state school students compared to 2014. Attendance increased by 0.5 per cent to 84.9 per cent and led to a narrowing of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 0.3 per cent to 7.1 per cent in 2015.

![Figure 2.1: Attendance rates, Indigenous and non-Indigenous state school students, 2015](image)

By gender

Female state school student attendance is higher than male attendance from Prep to Year 9. However, rates for female students show a steeper decrease than male students from Year 7, narrowing the gap between female and male students by Year 10. Male students show higher attendance than female students in Years 11 and 12.

![Figure 2.2: Attendance rates, male and female state school students, 2015](image)
Student attendance at Isis District State High School is up by four per cent, and is still steadily rising, thanks to a focused and data-driven approach.

Improved attendance is a key part of the school’s improvement agenda, and staff and students are able to articulate the school’s targets for improved attendance.

In 2014, the school’s average attendance was 88 per cent. An analysis of attendance trend data led to a range of interventions being implemented by the school.

Regular analysis of student behaviour data and student attendance data is undertaken by the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support team, and the range of interventions initiated by the two student welfare committees are returning significant early success. In particular, strategies to address problem attendance patterns on Fridays have returned promising early results.

The school’s average attendance at the time of its review was 92 per cent, with the school on course to reach its target of 95 per cent attendance.

The importance of attendance

Student absences from school impact negatively on their academic achievement, especially in relation to achievement in numeracy, reading and writing. These effects are not limited to the school year in which they occur, but also have a cumulative impact over time, affecting performance in future years (Hancock et al. 2013).

Interviews with teachers and students across the review schools confirmed that student absences, over time, negatively impacted on the continuity of learning, resulting in reduced learning outcomes for students. School staff made an association between students missing more than one day a week of school (or less than 90 per cent attendance; low attendance is considered less than 85 per cent) and their limited gains in key learning areas and social development.

In schools where attendance issues had been successfully addressed, the teachers, parents and students reported that there was also a positive impact on the school culture. As with attendance, a healthy school culture has a positive effect on student outcomes (Caldarella et al. 2011) and has been shown to influence positively on levels of achievement, reading level and school adjustment (Brand et al. 2008; Garrison 2004).

Use of data to inform attendance strategies

State schools are required to follow the department’s roll-marking procedure. In primary schools, students are marked as present or absent at the beginning of the school day and again in the afternoon. In secondary schools, rolls are marked at the beginning of the school day and for each lesson.

Following data input from schools, OneSchool is able to provide Queensland state schools with comprehensive data views of individual, class and whole-school attendance. These data can be used to track attendance, identify trends and tailor strategies. Schools made use of attendance data to prevent future major attendance issues through the early identification and addressing of minor attendance issues.

While not all schools are using this application to full advantage, the reviews found that some teachers were skilled in using the OneSchool class dashboard function to track and share attendance data with students. The improvement in student attendance in some schools was attributed to regular use of the dashboard data by staff.

Some attendance strategies are primarily based on the monitoring and sharing of attendance data, for example, the communication and celebration of up-to-date attendance data, and establishment of attendance data walls in classrooms or on school noticeboards. Staff associated these displays with improved attendance. Attendance data also directly informed schools about the implementation and success of their attendance strategies.

While attendance numbers and rates are a useful indication of many issues, they have their limitations. Additional modes of data collection and sources of data may be required to better understand the causes of student absences. For example, within the school review reports, staff and communities identified transport to and from school as a significant barrier to many students’ attendance at school.
In some review schools, where the issue warranted and resources were available, attendance officers were engaged to provide an often multi-pronged approach to attendance, including:

- managing absent students
- monitoring ‘at risk’ students
- conducting incentive programs
- promoting attendance.

Attendance officers may follow up on non-attendance and visit the homes of absent students, even on a daily basis. In certain instances, students were returned to the school once they had been located.

Principals who prioritised attendance often introduced a range of reward and recognition programs to acknowledge and promote student attendance. The programs included end-of-year raffles, highlighting student names in the newsletter, and breakfast programs.

In addition to recognition programs, some teachers were implementing strategies to improve attendance based on a rewards system. Teachers had classroom targets and students were engaged in regularly tracking the attendance rate for their class.

Attendance strategies tended to be reinforced through communication activities, such as sharing and discussing class attendance on assemblies each week, and through regularly publishing school attendance policies and articles concerning the importance of attendance in school newsletters. In some instances, the effort to address attendance involved entire local communities. For example, one campaign included the displaying of posters of congratulations in local business windows. When conducting reviews, review teams identified that a school having a clear line of sight was a hallmark of a successful strategy, that is, where the school leadership team, teachers, parents, students and the local community were all aware that attendance was a school priority.

Attendance data directly informed schools about the implementation and success of their attendance strategies.

### Attendance strategies

A recent departmental survey of Queensland state school principals identified strategies that school leaders considered to be most beneficial for addressing issues of attendance:

- A wide variety of attendance strategies, procedures and approaches are used by school leaders, with most perceived as having a slight to moderate impact.
- Primary and secondary school leaders sometimes use different strategies to address student absenteeism.
- Schools with higher and lower attendance rates often use similar strategies, but those with higher attendance rates more frequently perceive their strategies as having a greater impact. Schools with lower attendance rates, on the other hand, typically report having attempted a greater number of strategies with varying degrees of success.
- Among both primary and secondary school leaders, ‘dedicated attendance officers’ was the strategy most frequently perceived as having a significant impact.
- Other approaches frequently perceived by school leaders as having a substantial impact include implementing targeted strategies to:
  - improve student wellbeing
  - strengthen the school’s relationships with families (used more commonly by primary schools)
  - ensure students feel connected to the school
  - reward improved or regular student attendance.

Within the school review reports, policies and procedures for promoting and monitoring student attendance were regularly evidenced. Common approaches to attendance were:

- the appointment and use of specialist staff, including the targeting of ‘at risk’ students
- clear and consistent processes for dealing with student absences
- incentives for attendance
- the principal-led prioritisation of attendance throughout the school
- communication of strategies across the school community.

In review schools, common strategies for dealing with unexplained student absences included parental contact. In some schools, class teachers themselves followed up unexplained student absences with telephone calls and emails to parents.

Parental support is paramount in addressing school attendance issues (Hancock et al. 2013). In the school reviews, principals described the ongoing challenges in promoting parental support for attendance. Schools implemented both a wide range of positive strategies to encourage attendance and deliberate strategies to engage with parents of students where attendance patterns were of concern.

Within review schools, principals regularly addressed attendance as a priority by employing a whole-school strategy. In some cases, they were personally leading the focus on enhancing attendance by tracking attendance of every student on a daily basis. Principals regularly noted that attendance strategies were more successful when attendance-focused conversations were held regularly with the whole school community.
Outcomes of strategies

Improvements in attendance reported by some schools during 2015 provided powerful examples of what a collective, focused effort, based on high expectations and executed through strong systems and a positive community, including parent and student relationships, can achieve. Following the successful implementation of attendance strategies, student absences were no longer a significant issue for selected review schools.

During a school review, one very large, urban primary school in the South East region demonstrated its significant focus on improving student attendance over the past two years. The results were clear: the average attendance in 2014 was 93.5 per cent, with 10.3 per cent of students attending less than 85 per cent of the time (considered as low attendance). At the end of Term 1 2015, the attendance rate had risen to 94.1 per cent, with only eight per cent attending less than 85 per cent of the time. This was better than the overall Queensland schools average.

The leadership team at the school had been analysing school performance data across selected key priority areas, including attendance and behaviour, over a number of years. Clearly defined targets for improvement were then created and further developed for greater clarity, and spelt out in accompanying timelines.

Staff were committed to enhancing learning outcomes for students. A school-wide culture of high expectations for student academic outcomes was also becoming embedded within the school at the time of the review. High expectations were evident for student behaviour, uniform standards and school attendance.

Parents were kept well informed about the school and were highly supportive of its policies and procedures. They were particularly appreciative of the school’s high attendance and behaviour ethos and had a clear understanding of the school’s key priorities. There was also evidence that the school communicated effectively with parents (and employed a range of ways in which they did this), and encouraged parents to play an active role in their child’s learning and ensuring their attendance at school.

For many of the schools reviewed, issues of attendance were not significant and therefore targeted attendance strategies were not necessary. As attendance was not an improvement priority, the review of these schools did not explicitly address attendance or, for example, during Semester 1. Data for incidents which occurred during Semester 2 2015 were collected in February 2016 and will be available during the first quarter of 2016. The counts of SDAs are incident counts, and do not represent the number of students who receive SDAs, as a single student may receive more than one.

2.2 Behaviour

The behaviour of students is always a dominant topic within discussions on schooling. (Ball, Maguire & Braun 2012)

Student behaviour has a direct impact on student learning. The maintenance of conducive and safe learning environments is crucial for high levels of student achievement and learning (Caldarella et al. 2011; Hattie 2013). Therefore, as with attendance, positive student behaviour is necessary for effective student learning outcomes.

DET is committed to ensuring that all Queensland state schools provide positive and safe learning environments. A broad range of strategies is used by state schools to address student behaviour challenges. This includes school disciplinary absences (SDAs) comprising short suspensions, long suspensions, exclusions and, in some cases, cancellation of enrolment. The department’s Code of School Behaviour outlines obligations and expectations for maintaining order in state schools.

Domain 3 of the NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 6), in reference to a culture that promotes learning, sets out the essential components of a school-wide approach to behaviour:

- the school has clear strategies to promote appropriate behaviour — including agreed responses and consequences for inappropriate student behaviour — and the school provides sufficient support for teachers to implement these policies.

2.2.1 Behaviour measures

Each August, the department conducts a census of all state schools, collecting details of SDA incidents which occurred during Semester 1. Data for incidents which occurred during Semester 2 2015 were collected in February 2016 and will be available during the first quarter of 2016. The counts of SDAs are incident counts, and do not represent the number of students who receive SDAs, as a single student may receive more than one.
The majority of state school students behave appropriately every day and participate fully in learning to the best of their ability. The patterns of SDAs across the state school system consistently indicate that only seven per cent of Queensland’s state school students receive at least one SDA during the school year. Fewer than three per cent of state school students receive two or more SDAs during a school year.

Changes were introduced in 2014 and 2015 that have had an impact on the comparability of SDAs over time. The changes have caused a time series break and therefore caution should be exercised in making time series comparisons.

Semester 1 2015 results

In Semester 1 2015, 35,071 incidents were recorded, an increase of 8.7 per cent when compared to Semester 1 2014. The increase was primarily in short suspensions (suspensions of one to 10 days), which comprised 92 per cent of all SDAs.

The growth in short suspensions has primarily occurred in Year 7, with short suspensions for this year level increasing by 2398 incidents, compared with the increase of short suspensions in all year levels of 2780.

Long suspensions (suspensions of 11 to 20 days) have increased to 1202 incidents, an increase of 19.7 per cent when compared to Semester 1 2014.

Cancellation of enrolment has decreased by 17.2 per cent (down to 806 incidents) when compared with Semester 1 2014.

Far North Queensland (down 94 or 3.1 per cent) is the only region where there has been an overall decrease in SDAs.

The following changes in 2014 were particularly significant:

- Short suspensions changed from 1–5 school days to 1–10 school days.
- Long suspensions changed from 6–20 school days to 11–20 school days.
- A new suspension type, charge suspension, was introduced. A student who is charged with a criminal offence may be suspended while the charge is pending if the principal is reasonably satisfied that it would not be in the best interests of other students or staff for the student to attend the school.
- State school principals were given increased autonomy and more flexibility to manage inappropriate student behaviour.

Other factors which may influence year-to-year variability at school level include:

- changed behaviour expectations
- changed principal view about giving SDAs, or a change in principal
- changed behaviour of students
- fluctuations in enrolments (student enrolments for state schools increased by 1.3 per cent between Semester 1 2014 and Semester 1 2015 to 522,345).

Figure 2.3: Long and short suspensions, Queensland state schools, 2015

Figure 2.4: Cancellations and exclusions, Queensland state schools, 2015
Student disciplinary absences — by reason

Physical misconduct continues to be the main reason given for SDAs (see Figure 2.5).

SDAs given for the reason of absence increased to 435 incidents, up 16.3 per cent when compared to Semester 1 2014. An investigation of cases where SDAs were given for reasons of absence revealed that they are primarily used in situations where a student has left the school grounds without permission and not where the student has a pattern of absences.

Incidents involving students receiving an SDA for substance misconduct involving tobacco and other legal substances, or involving an illicit substance, have decreased by 10.2 per cent from Semester 1 2014.
2.2.2 Behaviour strategies in review schools

Of the 369 schools reviewed during 2015 by the SIU, only five per cent had included behaviour within their current improvement agendas (not surprising considering that it is a precondition and not an end in itself). In almost a quarter of all review school reports, improvement strategies included the implementation of behaviour management strategies and processes.

Behavioural problems, often combined with disengagement and non-attendance, were issues for a number of students in a number of schools, with many teachers reporting students exhibiting a range of challenging behaviours both inside and outside of the classroom. A range of undesirable student behaviour was documented as impacting negatively on student learning, for example, speaking out in class, talking with other students, and an inability to follow teacher instruction.

A number of specific behaviour management programs and strategies implemented in schools were identified and referred to within the review reports, for example, School Wide Positive Behaviour Support, Positive Behaviour for Learning, peer support programs and explicit instruction. Improvement in these schools' behaviour data was also apparent. School leadership teams considered their own local context, including their priorities and the age of students, when determining which (if any) of these programs were likely to address the specific behavioural issues in their school.

The common information about behaviour management within the review reports included:

- use of data to inform strategies, including the scope of behavioural issues
- features of particular strategies and importance of consistency of implementation of strategies
- outcomes of the strategies implemented.

Use of data to inform behaviour strategies

School leaders accessed behaviour data to identify trends and used these data to influence their behaviour activity. Behaviour data were regularly collected using OneSchool. Graphs were produced to illustrate positive behaviours and these were often prominently displayed. This information was used to understand the school’s behavioural issues, and to inform responsive programs at the individual, group and whole-school levels, as well as the explicit teaching of positive behaviours and key messages for students and parents.

School leaders accessed behaviour data to identify trends and used these data to influence their behaviour activity.

Schools also systematically collected data on incidences and shared these data with classroom teachers. Interventions, including class and group programs, were then implemented with students to improve their behaviour.
The importance of consistency when addressing behaviour was identified as paramount within the school review reports. The review schools tended to have either clear and consistently applied behaviour management strategies in place, or they identified the lack of consistency in application as a barrier to effectively addressing issues of behaviour. When applied consistently, behaviour management strategies clarified expectations for how students should behave and interact with one another. They also clarified expectations for staff. Positive behaviours were then rewarded and student achievements were celebrated. Strategies needed to be consistently implemented within each classroom, and by all staff within the school. Staff regularly engaged in behaviour conversations with students.

Some review schools articulated values systems, often centred on respect, safety and responsibility, to guide their behaviour management efforts. These values provided a common language in promoting conversations regarding student behaviour throughout schools.

As voiced by both students and parents, consistency of consequences was a central concern for school communities in some review reports. Teachers indicated that, although only a small percentage of students were involved in displaying unacceptable behaviour, they were concerned about the lack of consistent consequences and expectations across the school. This occurred when student behaviour was not a central focus of the school’s endeavours. Consistent application of behaviour management strategies required a significant leadership capacity and time for referrals, feedback and follow-up.

**Outcomes of strategies**

The review reports tended to show that a focus on student behaviour, which was embedded within the daily life of the school, would more likely result in improvements in student behaviour, as well as in a consistency of teaching practice. Where behaviour management programs had been successfully implemented throughout a school, student behaviour expectations were clearly visible:

- There were high standards of behaviour and attendance across the school.
- A decrease in student disciplinary absences was evident.
- Students and parents were able to demonstrate a high level of understanding of the behaviour management strategy.

In addition, teachers reported feeling well supported by school leaders when dealing with behaviour issues. The staff, students and parents interviewed reported high levels of satisfaction with appropriate student behaviour.

For many of the schools reviewed, issues of student behaviour were not of concern and therefore SDAs were unnecessary. As behaviour was not an area for improvement, the review of these schools did not explicitly detail behaviour management processes. However, there was evidence that schools were proactively embedding behaviour management processes. An analysis of the quantitative school data demonstrated the effectiveness of these processes.

A three-year focus on consistent pedagogical practices has reduced SDAs by almost 50 per cent at Wavell State High School.

Improved teaching practices and a school-wide culture of consistent expectations — using the Art and Science of Teaching — have led to better student engagement. This, in turn, has reduced the number of student suspensions and exclusions.

Students clearly understand the school’s expectations for behaviour. The school’s code of conduct groups 10 classroom rules into three Ps: prepared, punctual and polite.

The school sets high expectations on the first day of school every year, when the principal delivers a clear message to every year group. Teachers then identify the standards of each student’s behaviour throughout the year by applying a reporting matrix.

This consistent approach helps students to understand their positive choices and strengths, and to take pride in them. In addition, year-level assemblies every fortnight are an opportunity to identify and reward students for positive behaviour.

The school leverages Brisbane North Behaviour Support Services for further assistance for students who require longer suspensions, and proactively works with feeder schools to target and support students who may have difficulty transitioning into the high school.

The school recognises that the reasons behind students’ behaviour are complex and seeks to promote students’ strengths.

A behaviour management working group reviews the school’s policies and practices every year, analyses data and measures success.

Data around disciplinary absences clarify the reasons for student misbehaviour and give the school parameters in which to support students to make better choices in the future.
One very large, urban secondary in Metropolitan region considered student behaviour a challenge. In the 2014 School Opinion Survey (SOS), staff (5.9 per cent), parents (11.7 per cent) and students (11.8 per cent) indicated that they did not believe that student behaviour was well managed in the school. Interviews with parents, staff and students also confirmed this negative viewpoint. The rate of SDAs in 2014 was 9.7 per term per 1000 students, all short absences. However, this was significantly less than the state rate of 16.8. In response to these data, the school was developing clear and consistent strategies to promote appropriate behaviour, which included agreed responses and consequences for inappropriate student behaviour, and providing sufficient support for teachers.

In another very large, urban secondary school in Metropolitan region where the rate of SDAs in 2014 was above that of the state, a consistent effort was being made by all those in the school community to minimise negative behaviours. This was being met with varied success. The school had developed a responsible behaviour plan for students and all classrooms displayed the school rules. The responsible behaviour plan for students clearly described expectations for behaviour and consequences for inappropriate behaviour. However, the review team noticed inconsistencies between the recognition of minor or major incidents of behaviours at the school. In addition, the distinction between minor and major behaviours was not clearly defined by all teachers.

The review team also noted that SDA data were high and did not correlate with the general perception in the school that the behaviour management strategy had been successful in minimising negative behaviours. The average number of short suspensions per 1000 students per term was 113. Exclusions averaged 3.8 per 1000 students per term. Cancellations averaged 6.1 per 1000 students per term. Professional learning in behaviour management for teachers was ongoing and supported by the regional behaviour management facilitator. Some teachers believed that they would further benefit from learning specific strategies for maintaining a positive classroom environment and responding to inappropriate behaviour.

The school promoted REAL values — Respect, Excel, Attend, Learn — and these were explained to and understood by students. Expectations for student behaviour were explicitly taught in the weekly lessons, using a consistent lesson plan which was sent out to teachers one week prior to the lesson. The weekly focus for lessons was drawn from behaviour data. Parents and staff at the school generally agreed that the tone of the school had improved considerably, and staff morale had risen since the implementation of the behaviour management strategy. School pride had also improved, as evidenced in the large numbers of students receiving behaviour awards. The awards were presented to those who demonstrated consistent positive behaviour aligned with the core values of the school.

2.3 School community satisfaction

According to research, some of the most meaningful or effective partnerships are those where schools, parents, students and the community work together to focus on student learning. Parent and community engagement that is effectively focused on student learning can deliver powerful outcomes (DET 2015e).

As Queensland is a large state with a diverse range of communities, it is important to acknowledge that each school has its own context to which it responds. Contextual factors include:

- rural, urban and remote locations
- composition and diversity of the school community
- level of socio-educational advantage
- nature and prevalence of local industry
- vulnerability of the community to natural disasters.

It is essential that schools individualise their engagement strategies to suit their particular needs and those of their parents and communities. The education of students is a shared responsibility, benefiting all students, the local and state economy, and society as a whole. Therefore, schools, parents and broader communities have a reciprocal responsibility to engage with one another (DET 2015e).

Schools are better able to support student achievement by developing strong engagement with and between:

- students
- teachers and school staff
- parents and carers
- other educational institutions
- community, industry and business groups.

Of the 369 schools reviewed during 2015 by the SIU, all participated within their local communities. However, the level of participation varied. Schools demonstrated an understanding of the importance of positive and caring relationships for successful student learning, and worked to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships within their local communities. Schools sought to create cultures conducive to learning where students and staff felt a sense of belonging and parents were welcomed into the school. In many instances parents and community members spoke highly of their schools. Within their communities, schools valued a variety of cultural backgrounds and worked to build the cultural competence of staff.

School community satisfaction is measured and reported from the findings of the SOS, which is an annual suite of surveys (parent/caregiver, student, staff and principal) conducted to gauge opinions on important aspects of schooling in Queensland state schools. The staff and principal surveys also provide an opportunity for school staff to express their opinions about the school as a work environment.

The SOS is designed to help Queensland state schools further understand what schools are doing well and how to better meet the needs of their community. The information collected informs planning processes and assists in highlighting areas of focus for school improvement.
2.3.1 School community satisfaction measures

Results from the 2015 SOS continue to show high levels of satisfaction from parents/caregivers, students and staff with Queensland state schools.

Key findings from the SOS — by demographic

- Indigenous students, parents/caregivers and school staff reported slightly lower levels of total positive agreement than non-Indigenous respondents to either the majority or all items across each of the surveys in 2015.
- Parents/caregivers with language other than English (LOTE) spoken at home reported slightly higher levels of total positive agreement to the majority of items in the 2015 parent/caregiver survey than non-LOTE parents/caregivers. In contrast, students with LOTE spoken at home reported slightly lower levels of total positive agreement to the majority of items in the 2015 student survey than non-LOTE students.
- Parents/caregivers of students in special schools reported the highest level of total positive agreement, followed by primary schools, secondary schools and Prep–Year 10/12 schools in 2015.
- Students in primary schools reported the highest level of total positive agreement, followed by Prep–Year 10/12 schools and secondary schools in 2015.

When asked about their level of agreement against the Service Delivery Statement (SDS) measure “This is a good school”, parents/caregivers, students and school staff all had very positive opinions (over 90 per cent agreement). This is consistent with results from previous years and above the 2015–16 SDS target.

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Table 2.4: Positive responses to the statement ‘This is a good school’ from SOS, 2012–15

Note: ‘All staff’ data for 2012 are not comparable as the response scales and items were changed in 2013 to align with the National School Opinion Survey, resulting in a time series break.

The suite of SOSs gradually transitioned from a paper-based form to an online survey between 2007 and 2014. The number of responses to the parent/caregiver, staff and principal surveys was slightly lower in 2015 than in 2014 (see Table 2.5). This was despite the survey being open longer in 2015 compared to previous years.

Figure 2.6: Positive responses to the statement ‘This is a good school’ in SOS, by respondent group, 2012–15

Note: ‘All staff’ data for 2012 is not comparable as the response scales and items were changed in 2013 to align with the National School Opinion Survey, resulting in a time series break.

As Figure 2.6 shows, in 2015 positive agreement to all items was consistently high, with all items demonstrating over 75 per cent total positive agreement. Further, students from special schools and principals in general had very high positive agreement (greater than 95 per cent total positive agreement) to all items.

From 2014 to 2015, students’ total positive agreement on all items slightly decreased. However, the greatest percentage change from 2014 to 2015 was a decrease of only one per cent.
Parents/caregivers reported a two per cent increase in total positive agreement from 2012 to 2015 for the item ‘This school encourages me to participate in school activities’.

Students reported a 5.3 per cent increase in total positive agreement from 2012 to 2015 for the item ‘Student behaviour is well managed at my school’.

School staff reported an 11.3 per cent increase in total positive agreement from 2013 to 2015 for the item ‘This school encourages me to take responsibility for my work’.

Teaching staff reported a 1.4 per cent increase in total positive agreement from 2013 to 2015 for the item ‘I feel confident in my knowledge of the Australian and Queensland curriculums’.

Principals reported a 1.9 per cent increase in total positive agreement from 2013 to 2015 for the item ‘I feel well supported by the department to lead this school’.

Parents/caregivers reported a 2.5 per cent decline in total positive agreement from 2012 to 2015 for the item ‘This school takes parents’ opinions seriously’.

School staff reported an 8.4 per cent decline in total positive agreement from 2013 to 2015 for the item ‘There is good communication between all staff at this school’.

Teaching staff reported a 1.7 per cent decline in total positive agreement from 2014 to 2015 for the item ‘This school has the buildings and infrastructure to support teaching and learning practices’.

Principals reported a 0.5 per cent decline in total positive agreement from 2013 to 2015 for the item ‘Teaching staff at this school have the skills to improve student outcomes’.
It is hard to improve on perfection but Glen Aplin State School is determined to give it a go.

The school, south of Stanthorpe, has 100 per cent of its community behind it — proven by every single staff and community respondent to the SOS declaring, ‘This is a good school’.

A well-introduced behaviour management program that celebrates and rewards student successes continues to fuel community satisfaction, as does a clear focus on spelling, grammar and punctuation, and reading comprehension. NAPLAN results over the past six years for Year 3 show the steady rise of student performance in the upper two bands (U2B) of achievement.

A professional learning plan supports this improvement agenda, with teachers accessing external support and meeting one-to-one with the principal. Plans to extend professional learning through coaching, modelling and professional and learner feedback are underway.

Glen Aplin is a school that knows itself well, thanks to the review team. Plans to extend professional learning through coaching, modelling and professional and learner feedback are underway.

Community support at the school is strong. Parents are regarded as partners in their children’s learning, and the school actively engages with parents of students, including pre-Prep students through a playgroup program.

Glen Aplin State School is strengthening its community ties. Partnerships with local cluster schools are growing, and a link to Stanthorpe State High School helps to transition students into secondary school.

2.3.2 School community satisfaction practices in review schools

The review reports revealed that schools which were active within their school communities demonstrated a number of similar activities. These activities were found to have positive effects on schools and their communities. However, schools would need to consider their own local circumstances, priorities and the age of students before determining which (if any) of these activities would be applicable or useful to their own situation.

Across the reports, staff, students, parents and community members often spoke highly of schools, with some community members speaking of traditions of generational engagement with schools. Schools commonly demonstrated relationships with their communities that were based on mutual respect among the staff, students and school community. There was also a strong sense of belonging by all in many schools. Schools tended to have a strong presence in their communities, with students involved in numerous activities, such as sporting events, performances and displays of visual arts.

Community members and parents spoke highly of school leaders and staff, expressing their satisfaction with school administration teams. They were supportive of school improvement agendas and the reform work achieved by schools throughout recent years. In one school, the review team had noticed a new stability in school leadership had enhanced the growth and development of school–community partnerships.

Within other schools there was evidence that school leaders had made considerable effort to re-engage parents and the community, thereby increasing the level of confidence in the school. These schools had worked with families and the community to increase their involvement with their school, viewing parents and families as integral members of their school communities and partners in the learning of their students.

High levels of trust were apparent across school communities, and schools were often regarded as the hub of their communities. Communities spoke of the commendable pride they had in their local schools. Parents and students praised their schools, and there was a shared commitment by school leaders to build on community goodwill and identity. Community representatives articulated an immense pride in the improvement journey of schools over previous years. There was a strong sense of expectation regarding the future of schools in their communities. Schools experienced fires and cyclones which had growing positively in the eyes of their communities, with success stories and improvement experiences being shared through a variety of media.

Schools are continuing to develop learning cultures and their profiles within their communities. School newsletters, websites and discussions with community members demonstrated the development of strong learning cultures.

For some schools, the participation in their community was crucial as they had experienced adversities during previous years. Schools experienced fires and cyclones which had required them to focus attention on student, parent and staff welfare needs. Staff and their wider communities indicated that these events can impact on the progress of the school’s improvement agenda.
School initiatives

- Active community partnerships include local businesses and community associations.
- A positive professional culture is supporting pedagogical change.

School-wide improvements and effective community partnerships are helping to create high levels of satisfaction at St Helens State School.

An active Parents and Citizens’ Association enthusiastically supports the school’s goals and provides funding, resources and direction within the school community.

School-run community events, such as the annual field day, tap into local businesses, community associations and sporting clubs, and a chaplaincy program offers a range of programs and partnerships.

St Helens has experienced a recent growth in enrolments and is working to align its increasing student numbers with workforce plans and resource allocations.

An explicit improvement agenda, with priorities including reading, spelling and numeracy, has the support of teachers. Teachers accept responsibility for their professional learning, and high-quality teaching practices throughout the school are driving agenda priorities. School-wide practices for coaching and feedback are also being introduced.

The school is committed to improving learning outcomes for all students. Strategies for student improvement are clear and teachers actively establish personal learning goals with each student. Deliberate feedback helps foster students’ ownership of their learning.

The result is an engaged school community that actively supports the school, with 100 per cent of all respondents to the school opinion survey indicating ‘this is a good school’.

School community satisfaction strategies

The school review satisfaction indicators that schools were interacting within their local communities in different ways, and that school community satisfaction was influenced by a number of activities implemented by individual school leaders and schools as a whole. The integration of school Indigenous communities and other multicultural communities was also an aspect highlighted within the school review reports that influenced school community satisfaction.

Leaders contributed greatly to the strength of their communities and school systems through learning-focused instructional leadership. The NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 18) states that schools should:

... actively seek ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by partnering with parents and families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations.

School leaders were actively networking with other local school leaders within their school clusters to support leadership development, collegial support and student interaction. Principals and other school leaders built networked school connections that supported leadership development through their participation in events for school leaders. Schools were also strategically accessing internal and external expertise to assist with professional learning. An example from a 2015 review report was that of an urban primary school principal in North Coast region who was modelling a strong and productive commitment to her leadership role by participating in both the Queensland Association of State School Principals at a state level, and in an established network of small-school principals.

In addition to working within their own communities, schools and their leaders were also engaging with neighbouring communities. Schools were sharing evidence-based professional learning activities and engaging in reciprocal modelling, observation and feedback opportunities for teachers across multiple schools. A rural primary school principal in Darling Downs South West region, who had responsibility for chairing a local cluster of schools, stated that the moderation of work with teachers from local primary schools within the cluster was an extremely beneficial activity for their school.

There were many examples within the school reviews of Indigenous and other cultures being embraced and supported within school communities. One school noted that Indigenous students were recognised as important members of their school community, and that a community education counsellor (CEC) was employed to support students. Teacher aides were employed to support Indigenous students within the classroom. Another school had the school motto ‘two-way strong’, which provided the opening for respectful relationships with the community, Elders and others with cultural knowledge and expertise to contribute. The cohesive multicultural environment at the school was clearly visible, and seen as a strength by all school community members.

A very large, urban secondary in Far North Queensland was characterised by positive and caring relationships and providing an inclusive, welcoming environment. Staff, students and the community identified and valued the harmony of relationships and the cultural diversity that defined their school. Students and staff spoke readily of the potential to enrich their learning culture through an even greater focus on the diverse range of ethnic cultures within the school.
For some schools, the building of school community relationships was an emerging area, with active growth and development noted by the school review teams. Community members, staff and students confirmed growing levels of public confidence and trust in schools. However, staff and community satisfaction within schools was, at times, varied. A small number of parents were critical of school staff, stating disapproval with the lack of staff renewal and the ways in which the school engaged with them. Despite these instances, parents generally articulated support for their schools, school leaders and teachers, and their work.

Although staff positively described the ways in which they worked together, some did state that they would welcome additional opportunities to have input into school decision making. In addition, some school leaders and staff expressed a desire to further develop the effectiveness of the school team in school–community partnerships.

Outcomes of strategies

The strategies adopted by schools in community satisfaction yielded many positive outcomes. Communities spoke highly of schools, regarding them as teams of outstanding leaders, teachers and community advocates. The review teams received commendations from parents, community members and business partners regarding the strong leadership of schools, friendly staff and well-behaved students. Overall, communities viewed their schools favourably.

Community members, such as mayors and state members of parliament, commented on the positive aspects of their local schools and the school leadership teams. There was evidence of improved community perceptions of schools that resulted in enrolments of students from the non-state school system. Whole-school communities acknowledged and celebrated the improvement journeys of schools. School Parents and Citizens’ Association (P&C) presidents and members acknowledged the improvements occurring in schools as they worked to enhance learning and support student wellbeing.

However, there were isolated examples of less positive outcomes for schools concerning their involvement within their communities. In some regional schools, parents and community members expressed concern about the diminishing enrolments in their schools as a result of recent changes in the economy and local population movement. In one school community, confidence was at an all-time low, with parents expressing concerns about academic accountability and safety within the school.
2.4 Literacy

In developing literacy, students listen to, read, view, speak, write and create oral, print, visual and digital texts. They use and modify language for different purposes in a range of contexts. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority)

Keeping the focus on literacy teaching and learning from Prep to Year 12 is critical to improving student academic achievement. Every student succeeding: State Schools Strategy 2016–2020 recognises literacy as imperative for every student’s success and improved school performance. The goal of improving literacy achievement in Queensland compels us to develop professional practices that improve literacy outcomes in all stages of schooling by continually monitoring literacy progress and targeting teaching to meet each student’s needs at every stage.

All those involved in leading, planning for, teaching and supporting learners have a role to play in improving literacy. Consequently, to improve teaching quality, there is a need to further lead and develop teachers’ professional practice so that robust literacy teaching and learning is evident and effective in all learning areas/subjects.

2.4.1 Literacy measures

NAPLAN assesses the literacy of students in reading, writing and language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in all state and non-state schools. Further details on NAPLAN, in particular reporting and participation, is provided in subsection 1.2.2, Australian public policy response.

The results for all Queensland school students are set out in Figures 2.9 to 2.12.

Reading

In 2015, Queensland Year 3 students excelled in reading, achieving results substantially above baseline in National Minimum Standard (NMS). Queensland Year 7 students also achieved their highest result on record in reading in NMS, upper two bands (U2B) and Mean Scale Score (MSS).

Figure 2.9 shows that Year 3 Queensland students have improved at a greater rate than other Australian students since 2008. This pattern of improvement has continued after 2011 as the Prep cohorts have progressed through their year levels. After 2013 for the Prep cohorts, the MSS for Queensland Year 5 students has been similar to that of other Australian students, although there has been a slight decline nationally.

Writing

Relative to the other test strands, Queensland students have shown poorer performance in writing. Coinciding with the introduction of two sets of writing prompts, in 2015 the pattern of results varied for Years 3 and 5 and for Years 7 and 9.

The latest results show (see Figure 2.10) that Years 3 and 5 had large gains in MSS compared to the previous year. However, Queensland Year 3 students were not as close to the national average as older students.

Years 7 and 9 students, on the other hand, displayed general declines in performance, both since 2008 and 2014. The declines in Years 7 and 9 were similar across the nation. Across Queensland and Australia, Years 7 and 9 students achieved MSS results which were statistically below their 2011 baselines and represented a decline from their 2014 results. These declines were also reflected in the results of Queensland state school students.
Students at Mount Isa Central State School are reaping the benefits of a focused, whole-school approach to reading.

As part of the school’s broader approach to curriculum and planning, the school’s focus on reading reflects teachers’ shared expectation that every student will read to a high standard.

Data are integral to the school’s approach. Every five weeks, teachers test reading and mathematics to provide a detailed record of achievement for each student.

Every classroom has a data wall, with students encouraged to advance their personal icon — identified only with their birth date — as they improve. This makes achievement and improvement visible for students.

Data informs differentiated teaching. Teachers analyse results to see where students are achieving and then tailor learning experiences to provide them with the best possible opportunities.

Professional learning and resources reflect the school’s dedicated focus on reading and encourage teacher reflection and best practice.

The approach is having the desired effect, with the 2015 NAPLAN results indicating the school is reaching its targets for literacy achievement in Years 3 and 5.

Spelling

In spelling, across all year levels, Queensland students have improved their performance relative to the nation. Queensland Year 7 students are now similar to the Australian average (see Figure 2.11). Although the difference in performance in spelling between Queensland students and the national average is largest for Years 3 and 5, the greatest improvements for Queensland students have occurred in these year levels, more so as the Prep cohorts have progressed through Year 3 since 2011, and Year 5 since 2013.

In 2015, Queensland Year 7 students achieved their highest result on record in spelling (in NMS, U2B and MSS), effectively closing the achievement gap between Queensland and the Australian average.

Figure 2.11: NAPLAN spelling, Australia and Queensland, 2008–15

Grammar and punctuation

In 2015, the performance of Queensland students in grammar and punctuation was very similar to the Australian average for all year levels, with the greatest progress in Years 3 and 5, again most notably for the Prep cohorts since 2011 and 2013 respectively (see Figure 2.12). Queensland Year 3 students performed well in grammar and punctuation, achieving results substantially above baseline in NMS.

Figure 2.12: NAPLAN grammar and punctuation, Australia and Queensland, 2008–15

Students at Mount Isa Central State School are reaping the benefits of a focused, whole-school approach to reading.

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School initiatives

- Minimum standard of classroom artefacts
- Faces on the data: students own their learning and achievement
- Differentiated teaching to bring every student to benchmark
- Reading and mathematics tests every five weeks to track progress
2.4.2 Literacy practices in review schools

Many of the schools reviewed in 2015 prioritised literacy as an area for improvement. As a result, there was much activity noted in this area in the review school reports. Schools work to develop a consistent school-wide approach to the teaching of reading, writing and oral language across all learning areas and all year levels. A whole-school approach to student literacy learning provides for explicit instruction, which is differentiated in order to respond to the needs of all students (DET 2016a). Within the review reports, there was evidence of consistent whole-school approaches that provided for differentiated learning for students.

The review reports showed that principals and school leaders were active in focusing staff and community attention and energy on literacy. Key areas of literacy that were being targeted included:

- reading comprehension
- metalinguistic awareness
- writing
- handwriting
- spelling.

Literacy committees had been created to support the development of whole-school literacy strategies. Many schools were delivering these strategies.

Literacy instruction was delivered either during dedicated lessons in English or blocks each week using a range of common strategies and resources across the school, or the fundamental skills of literacy were explicitly embedded across all subjects. A range of commercial programs was being used in the delivery of literacy. Programs noted in the review reports included:

- Levelled Literacy Intervention
- Ripper Reader Program
- THRASS (Teaching Handwriting, Reading And Spelling Skills)
- MultiLit
- MiniLit
- Repeated Reading
- Tactical Teaching of Reading
- STRIVE (vocabulary building program)
- The Café
- Daily 5 Literacy Support
- Skim and Scan, Connect and Question, Organise Your Thinking, Read and Reflect, be the Expert (SCORE)
- SCORE, Accuracy, Fluency, Expanded Vocabulary (SAFE)
- Seven Steps to Writing Success.

Differentiated student learning, informed by student achievement data, was a strong element of teaching delivery overall, but was especially noted within the area of literacy. Student achievement data were consistently used to tailor learning for students, and these data were revised regularly and groups adjusted to suit the individual learning needs of students.

Literacy was being delivered by classroom teachers or specialist literacy personnel; on occasion the principal was observed by SIU review teams delivering literacy lessons. Teacher aides were commonly used to support classroom teachers in the delivery of literacy programs and to assist in the differentiated learning of students.

A range of professional learning strategies was being used to train staff in the delivery and pedagogy of literacy programs. In addition, specialist literacy teachers regularly worked with classroom teachers to build their capacity in the area. Teaching staff were also trained in the use of the specific literacy programs that were being implemented within their schools.

Review schools that demonstrated improvement in literacy performance have undertaken a range of activities in order to address their literacy improvement priorities. Literacy interventions were evident across the teaching and learning timeline — from the developmental stages of a school’s improvement agenda, through to achievement data informing the next year’s teaching and learning.

Within the review reports, one school was seen engaging literacy experts during the development and implementation of its improvement agenda. Comprehensive analysis of NAPLAN also informed the school’s improvement agenda and played a significant role in the school’s decision making. As a result of having a focused improvement agenda, schools are able to implement targeted strategies specifically for writing, spelling and reading. Within schools with a record of improvement in literacy, there was often a clear line of sight from school priorities, to the allocation of resources, to the professional learning plan, to the teachers’ pedagogy for literacy.
School leaders at Kin Kora State School identified writing as an area for improvement, so set out to make a positive change through a focused, whole-school approach. The achievements to date are significant.

The approach was identified by reviewing student data and then sharing the findings with staff for further discussion and consideration. From there, a whole-school commitment to the improvement of writing was created.

To build their capacity in the teaching of writing, teaching staff were provided with professional development in the program. Teachers implemented a consistent approach to daily writing on demand tasks, and explicit instruction on text structures and language features.

A class performance tracker was introduced to track and monitor learning growth for all students in the class, and to inform individual student learning goals.

A school leader meets regularly with each classroom teacher to review class and individual student learning data, and to make timely adjustments to their teaching.

The changes are bearing fruit. NAPLAN 2015 writing results indicate Year 5 MSS above the nation, with achievement in the U2B for Year 3 above Queensland, and Year 5 results above the nation. NMS for Year 5 writing are also above the nation.

Schools with a record of improvement in literacy had systematic approaches to curriculum delivery. Collaboration was common, with teachers working in year-planning teams that included specialist teachers, such as the master teacher, the literacy and numeracy support teachers and special education teachers, to individualise learning experiences for students according to their achievement levels. Tailored teaching and learning strategies were planned over five-week cycles.

Schools with a record of improvement in literacy displayed learning cultures that featured whole-school approaches to literacy improvement. Literacy was often being delivered through timetabled blocks across schools in all year levels. Literacy blocks of up to an hour, up to three times a week, were noted. Student learning was reviewed and restructured regularly in response to individual student achievement data during collaborative teaching and learning meetings.

Building teacher capacity in the delivery of effective reading and writing instruction has been the continued focus for leadership teams in schools with a history of improvement. This focus on quality teaching promoted a consistent approach to teaching and learning across schools. To assist in building teacher capacity, schools engaged specialist literacy coaches and provided release time for teacher planning and data discussions with school leaders, such as heads of curriculum. In addition to resourcing teacher capacity building, schools also invested in additional technology support, allocated additional teacher aide support within classrooms, and prioritised the allocation of school-based resources to improve the performance of particular student groups.

Teachers were actively developing skills in the sophisticated use of data to inform their teaching. They were using a range of formative and summative assessment approaches to define reading groups for use within literacy blocks. Data were also used to assist schools to identify individual and small group student learning needs, and to select the most appropriate literacy programs for the specific needs of students.

A to E report card data

A comparison of student report card results with student NAPLAN results undertaken by the department has shown positive findings. Correlation analyses were conducted, which measured how closely report card results and NAPLAN results were related to each other for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 Queensland state school students.

Across the state, students with high grades in English tended to have high NAPLAN scores in reading, writing, spelling, and grammar and punctuation. Furthermore, students with high grades in maths tended to have high NAPLAN scores in numeracy. These correlations were strongest for Years 3, 5 and 7 and weaker for Year 9. Although NAPLAN and report cards are not necessarily assessing identical proficiencies, these findings indicate that report cards reflect student achievement.
2.5 Numeracy

Numeracy is the ability to recognise and understand the role of mathematics in the world. It includes "the dispositions and capacities to use mathematical knowledge and skills purposefully" (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority). Numeracy is one of the seven Australian Curriculum general capabilities and is embedded throughout the learning areas of the curriculum.

When teachers identify numeracy demands across the curriculum, students have opportunities to transfer their mathematical knowledge and skills to contexts outside the mathematics classroom. These opportunities assist students to recognise the interconnected nature of mathematical knowledge, other learning areas and the wider world, and encourage their broad use of mathematical skills.

All teachers are responsible for planning and teaching the subject-specific numeracy of their learning area, ensuring that students' numeracy development is strengthened and supports subject-based learning.

Research shows that numeracy is associated with higher probability of employment and higher earnings (Graffeo, Polonio & Bonini 2015).

2.5.1 Numeracy measures

NAPLAN assesses the numeracy of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in all state and non-state schools. These results are set out in Figure 2.13.

Queensland Years 5 and 9 students achieved above their 2014 results in numeracy (in NMS) in 2015. However, there were declines in U2B and MSS for Year 7 students. These declines in Year 7 numeracy were similar across the nation.

Since testing began, the performance in numeracy of Queensland Years 3 and 5 students, and to a lesser degree Year 9 students, has increased at a greater rate than the performance of Australian students as a whole. Year 7 students have progressed at roughly the same pace as the rest of the nation.

The improvements in numeracy are also evident across the Prep cohorts in Year 3 since 2011. The performance of Year 5 students has been closer to the performance of the nation since 2013.
2.5.2 Numeracy practices in review schools

A number of schools reviewed in 2015 had prioritised numeracy as an area for improvement, and a variety of activities were noted by the review teams that specifically targeted numeracy improvement. Schools were employing school-wide approaches and strategies to achieve their improvement priorities, including differentiated student learning and the engagement of specialist staff in the area of numeracy.

The 2015 review reports detailed school leadership teams focusing their attention on the priority curriculum area of numeracy. This focus was evident within school improvement agendas and could often be well articulated by staff, parents and students as the school’s improvement agenda. Schools were addressing numeracy through the use of specialist personnel, numeracy committees and the development of whole-school numeracy strategies for the classroom. These strategies were bolstered by the use of timelines, actions and expected outcomes. School leaders articulated high expectations for all of their staff regarding curriculum delivery and ensured that numeracy remained a priority.

The curriculum area of numeracy was most commonly being delivered through a school-wide, cross-curricular delivery strategy embedded within other teaching areas. In some schools, numeracy was taught explicitly using a particular approach, such as Elementary Math Mastery.

Differentiated learning for students in numeracy that supported students requiring extended learning opportunities, and those requiring additional assistance, was documented within review schools. Schools had developed numeracy plans, including higher order thinking and gifted and talented strategies, to provide direction for cross-curriculum priorities and differentiated learning for students.

For teachers to effectively deliver numeracy, a range of capacity-building activities were noted. There was an emerging understanding of whole-school approaches to the teaching of numeracy and the embedding of numeracy within the curriculum. While there was some evidence of school leaders promoting the embedding of cross-curriculum numeracy skills, this was not always evident. Teachers expressed agreement about the importance of clear and consistent curriculum expectations. Professional discussions were occurring about student learning and the teaching of numeracy. There was strong evidence of alignment between curriculum, assessment and the reporting of numeracy.

The targeted use of personnel for promoting numeracy was evident through the creation of positions such as head of curriculum – literacy and numeracy, numeracy coaches, master teachers and numeracy teacher aides. The use of numeracy committees and support teams was also noted in the execution of school numeracy strategies. Numeracy strategies were also driven by mathematics departments and teachers. Specialist staff worked with teachers in the development and delivery of numeracy across schools. Discussion around numeracy diagnostic data, and the implications for teaching and assessment, was noted by the review teams. These discussions around numeracy between specialist staff and teachers were highly valued by teaching staff.

Reviewed schools that demonstrated improvement in numeracy had undertaken a range of activities in order to address their numeracy improvement priorities. As with literacy, attention to numeracy was evident early in the developmental stages of the school’s improvement agenda. For the most part, the stimulus for the focus on numeracy was the school’s NAPLAN results.

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School leadership teams had established and were driving strong and detailed improvement agendas for their schools. These agendas included numeracy and were strongly grounded in research and practice. Improvement priorities were also aligned with statewide improvement priorities. School strategic plans provided a clear direction for school improvement with a small number of strategic priorities. Annual implementation plans and faculty or program plans were consistent with, and clarified, school priorities. School staff expressed strong and optimistic convictions that their school’s explicit improvement agenda would improve student learning outcomes, for example, moving more students into the NAPLAN U2B.

Within schools demonstrating improvement in numeracy, a strong line of sight extended from their explicit improvement agenda, through their data, to the allocation of resources. This alignment was further reflected in systematic strategies for identifying student needs and in creative school-wide approaches to addressing those needs. School strategies included special classes and coaching to support students at or below the NMS, and the more general use of specialist heads of department and numeracy coaches.

Schools allocated their resources to align with their numeracy priorities. Funding from a variety of programs, such as the Great Results Guarantee grant, was allocated to provide for speciality personnel, such as master teachers and teacher aides, to assist in the delivery of numeracy programs.

Data-informed strategies were used to drive learning, and school leaders were regularly working with teachers to review student achievement data. Data were collected on a regular basis (often weekly and per term), and these provided the foundation for data conversations. Teachers valued evidence-based decision making, although some teachers did express concerns about the demands in collecting the required datasets within strict timeframes. Data-informed decision making around numeracy continues to develop in review schools.

Differentiation of student learning was noted within review schools, with mathematics extension programs being offered in some schools. These were implemented by mathematics teachers or members of the school leadership team with mathematics expertise. Another differentiated approach was the establishment of number groups. These groups were targeted and well-resourced. They involved teachers and teacher aides working across year levels. Teachers’ understanding of how to construct learning experiences that extended and challenged a broad range of students within the classroom setting varied within and between review schools.

Within review schools with a history of improvement in numeracy, teachers regularly developed their capacity in the delivery of numeracy through professional learning communities (PLCs). Teachers valued the ongoing provision of timely professional learning opportunities in the priority area of numeracy to assist them in the engagement with and delivery of high-yield teaching practices. PLC members worked together to monitor initiatives and related targets to ensure their effectiveness regarding student learning and performance outcomes.

### 2.6 Student achievement in Year 12 attainment

Schools require a clear understanding of what it takes for each student to become a literate 21st century graduate in order to provide the best possible outcomes for their students (Harild & Sharratt 2015). In Queensland schools, students who complete Year 12 are issued with a senior education profile which could include a:

- Senior Statement, which indicates they have satisfied the completion requirements for Year 12 in Queensland
- Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), which is the senior school qualification
- Tertiary Entrance Statement, which determines eligibility for admission to a tertiary course
- Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA), which recognises the achievement of students who have an individualised learning program.

As the attainment of a QCE greatly enhances the future prospects of young Queenslanders, ensuring that every Queensland state school student has the opportunity to achieve this qualification is a top priority for DET. The QCE records achievement of a significant amount of learning, at a set standard and pattern in contributing studies, while meeting literacy and numeracy requirements.
A wide range of learning can contribute towards the QCE, including:

- senior school subjects
- vocational education and training (VET)
- workplace learning recognised by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA)
- university subjects undertaken while at school.

Students anticipating tertiary entrance currently receive an Overall Position (OP) which indicates their position on a statewide rank order. From 2019, students completing Year 12 will receive an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), rather than the existing OP. The ATAR will be calculated by a process of inter-subject scaling, as used in a number of other Australian jurisdictions. This will enable students completing different combinations of subjects to be compared in a single tertiary entrance rank.

The QCAA recognises the achievements of students who undertake individualised learning programs. To be eligible, students must have impairments or difficulties in learning that are not primarily due to socioeconomic, cultural or linguistic factors.

The following section highlights the current situation within Queensland state schools, and details what they are doing to assist students in their final years of schooling to prepare for life and work in the 21st century.

The vast majority of the 369 schools reviewed during 2015 by the SIU were primary schools, so these data relate to the 66 schools with a secondary program that offered a QCE as well as other school-leaving qualifications. The school reviews offered insight into:

- what Queensland schools were doing in order to provide for their students’ post-school opportunities
- how these strategies were informed by their data, including the setting of attainment targets
- what progress they were making towards those targets.

Schools are asked to consider their own local circumstances, priorities and the age of students before determining which (if any) of these programs and their associated strategies may be transferrable to the local context.

### 2.6.1 Year 12 attainment measures

In 2015, more than 50,000 students completed Year 12 in Queensland state and non-state schools, an increase of almost two per cent or 770 students from 2014.

The 2016 report, for students who completed Year 12 in 2015, was published on 20 February 2016 by the QCAA.

#### Key statewide QCE results for 2015

- Almost 94 per cent of Queensland Year 12 students received a QCE, the highest proportion since its introduction in 2008.
- The overall certification level for Queensland Year 12 students, incorporating both the QCE and the QCIA, has risen to more than 95 per cent.
- In 2015, more than 21 per cent of Queensland students received a VET certificate III or higher while completing their senior schooling.
- While the number of students completing Year 12 has increased since 2008, the number of students receiving an OP has remained steady, with very little change in the distribution of OP bands since 2012. Of those receiving an OP, almost 80 per cent obtained OP1 to OP15.

Similar results are observed for Queensland state schools, which represent about 60 per cent of Queensland’s Year 12 enrolments, and more than 70 per cent of Queensland’s Indigenous Year 12 enrolments.

#### Key Queensland state school QCE results for 2015

- More than 94 per cent of state school students received a QCE.
- Almost 97 per cent received either a QCE or QCIA.
- More than 21 per cent achieved a VET certificate III or higher.
- Of those who received an OP, more than 75 per cent received OP1 to OP15.
- Of all Year 12 completers who did not receive an OP1 to OP15 or an International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBD), almost 26 per cent received a VET certificate III or higher, the highest proportion yet.

Schools require a clear understanding of what it takes for each student to become a literate 21st century graduate in order to provide the best possible outcomes for their students.
In just three years, the proportion of William Ross State High School graduates attaining their QCE has risen significantly. The rapid improvement, from 74 per cent in 2012 to 100 per cent in 2015, reflects the school’s explicit and systematic improvement strategy.

The principal, teachers, support staff and parents are united in the belief that the school’s purpose is to make a difference in students’ lives, and that achieving the QCE is an essential indicator of future employment success. Much of the strategy is driven by quantitative data, with every teacher — from heads of department through to classroom teachers — able to visualise students’ progress via a common data wall.

Students, likewise, are invested in their own educational journey, bringing a learning journal to every class to record and track their summative assessment results.

QCE success is a school-wide priority, with junior secondary students mirroring QCE requirements through a Junior Certificate of Education, ensuring they are well prepared by the time they reach the senior years.

School initiatives
- Students use a learning journal to track their progress.
- All teachers collect data, monitor students’ progress and implement personalised action plans.
- These initiatives receive whole community support from school administration, leaders, teachers, students and parents.
Outcomes of strategies

Schools were making progress increasing the numbers of their students achieving Year 12 qualifications. In addition to the broad improvement trends noted above for Queensland state schools, the review reports also noted individual success within Year 12 attainment. For example, one school, which had a 100 per cent QCE attainment target, undertook a case management approach to monitor students’ progress towards achieving this qualification by the end of Year 12. Indigenous achievement was also being tracked and interventions were in place to provide students with every opportunity to meet QCE requirements. At the time of the review interview, all Year 12 Indigenous students were on track to attain their QCE for 2015 at the school.

Another school had engaged a dedicated head of department (HOD) of senior schooling and a HOD of vocational education and training, in order to have staff in key roles to systematically track the progress of senior students. In 2014, 82 per cent of students at the school achieved an OP 1–15, and 88 per cent achieved a QCE or QCIA. Students had flexibility in the range and combination of subjects they could choose which, according to the review team, appeared to have positively impacted on the school outcomes data in terms of the percentage of students who graduated with a qualification.

However, improvement was not noted in all review schools. In 2014, one school experienced a QCE completion rate of 86.3 per cent, which was down from 89.1 per cent in 2013. This decline was due to:

- changes to credit for literacy and numeracy certificate courses in 2014
- special education program students not receiving either a QCE or QCIA
- late entry of international and interstate students.

It was evident to the review team that the senior leadership team recognised the need to improve QCE completion rates, and there was a clear plan in place to address these issues with a target of 98 per cent in 2015.

Overall, the review reports demonstrated that schools were offering a wide variety of subjects in senior school that enabled students to pursue individual pathways, leading to high levels of QCE, QCIA and certificate III attainment, as well as solid OP results.

2.7 Closing the gap

‘Education provides the basis for optimism and accomplishment and can also assist individuals to combat disadvantage. There is almost no employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within higher levels of education.’ (Karmel et al. 2014).

Indigenous Australians today comprise approximately three per cent of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Although many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have access to life opportunities and a good standard of living, too many Indigenous Australians still experience unacceptable levels of disadvantage in living standards, life expectancy, education, health and employment (Karmel et al. 2014). Data show a significant gap in these critical areas between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population (Council of Australian Governments [COAG] 2008).

The disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people is multidimensional and, in 2007–08, COAG agreed to a number of ambitious targets to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage (COAG 2008 website). It agreed to:

- close the gap in life expectancy within a generation (by 2031)
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018
- ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities by 2013
- halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children by 2018
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020
- halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018.

In May 2014, COAG agreed to a new target to close the gap in school attendance by the end of 2018.
Tully State High School, which sits halfway between Cairns and Townsville, is working hard to close the gap in education outcomes for its Indigenous students.

The school’s annual implementation plan identified a broad range of priorities for 2015, which included strategies to address this issue.

There is a strong and inclusive learning culture at the school where respectful, positive and caring relationships are evident between staff members, students and parents. All speak very highly of the positive education culture at the school.

Resources are allocated to support and maximise opportunities for students at risk. For example, a rugby league program supports boys at risk of disengaging from learning. A community education counsellor and a community liaison officer provide additional support for Indigenous students.

The learning climate at the school is focused on student wellbeing, as a way of improving learning outcomes. This applies not only to Queensland but also to other jurisdictions.

In net terms, since 2008 when NAPLAN began:

NMS

- The gap narrowed in nine out of the 12 test areas included in the Closing the Gap targets — all strands except writing for Years 5, 7 and 9.
- Year 3 demonstrated the greatest narrowing of the gap overall compared to other year levels.
- Specifically, the gap for Year 3 reading narrowed by 51.6 per cent to 10.9 percentage points. The gap for Year 3 grammar and punctuation (although not specifically included as a Closing the Gap target) narrowed by 57.1 per cent to 10.9 percentage points.
- Year 9 numeracy also showed the gap was more than halved, with a reduction by 55.3 per cent since 2008.
- A number of other test areas appear close to achieving the targets in future years, most notably Year 7 reading in which the gap has narrowed by 46.2 per cent.
- The greatest widening of the gap occurred in Year 7 writing, by 8.3 per cent.

### 2.7.1 Closing the Gap measures

The latest reporting data show mixed progress on COAG’s education-related Closing the Gap targets.

**Access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds**

The original target to ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities expired unmet in 2013. A revised Closing the Gap target has been agreed between Australian governments. In 2013, 85 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four-year-olds in remote communities were enrolled in early childhood education — a higher rate than in regional areas (74 per cent) and in major cities (67 per cent) (Commonwealth of Australia 2016).

**Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children**

Across the eight areas (reading and numeracy for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9), the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieving NMS by 2018 is on track in four of these eight areas (Commonwealth of Australia 2016).

The target set by COAG of halving the gap in NMS for reading, writing and numeracy by 2018 was achieved in Queensland (all schools) for Year 3 reading and Year 9 numeracy in 2015. Year 5 reading also achieved this target in NMS in 2013, but the gap has since widened.

The year-on-year results do not display a consistent narrowing of the gap for any test area. Instead, they show a volatile pattern for NMS, U2B and MSS across all year levels. This applies not only to Queensland but also to other jurisdictions.

**Positive school culture closes the gap**

Tully State High School, which sits halfway between Cairns and Townsville, is working hard to close the gap in education outcomes for its Indigenous students.

The school’s annual implementation plan identified a broad range of priorities for 2015, which included strategies to address this issue.

There is a strong and inclusive learning culture at the school where respectful, positive and caring relationships are evident between staff members, students and parents. All speak very highly of the positive education culture at the school.

Resources are allocated to support and maximise opportunities for students at risk. For example, a rugby league program supports boys at risk of disengaging from learning. A community education counsellor and a community liaison officer provide additional support for Indigenous students.

The learning climate at the school is focused on student wellbeing, as a way of improving learning outcomes. This is evident in the use of support staff — including youth support coordinator and community education counsellor — in classrooms.

Indigenous perspectives are incorporated into the curriculum, in particular the Boomerang project with a local Elder, and the manual arts staff. Increased awareness of different cultures is promoted throughout the school via cultural days and other activities.
However, there is still even more work to do in Closing the Gap by 2020:

- In 2015, the state school gap in Years 10 to 12 apparent retention rates (ARR) was 16.8 percentage points, a narrowed but substantial gap. (Years 10 to 12 ARR compares the number of Year 12 enrolments with the number of Year 10 enrolments, two years prior. The ARR is a proxy for Year 12 completion rates.)
- All students are eligible for either a QCE or a QCIA. However, the OP1–15 and IBD measures are based only on those students who receive an OP or who are eligible for an IBD. In 2015, about 19 per cent of Indigenous state school Year 12 completers received an OP or were eligible for an IBD, compared with about 43 per cent of their non-Indigenous peers. The gap in eligibility has narrowed since 2014 but remains significant at 23.9 percentage points.
- The gap in OP1–15, or IBD, is on a narrowing trend over the last seven years but, at almost 22 percentage points, Indigenous students continue to be appreciably under-represented in the higher levels of achievement.

Halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment

Year 12 outcomes for Indigenous state school students were at an all-time high in 2015, with narrowed or very small gaps in most measures (see Figure 2.14):

- There was a 3.5 per cent increase in Year 12 completion.
- Almost 91 per cent received a QCE, a five percentage point narrowing of the gap to less than four percentage points.
- Almost 95 per cent of Indigenous students achieved either a QCE or a QCIA, a five percentage point narrowing of the gap to less than two percentage points.
- 20 per cent achieved a VET certificate III or higher. While slightly wider than in 2014, the gap for this measure remains small at 1.5 percentage points.
2.7.2 Closing the Gap practices in review schools

Schools with Indigenous students were responding to the cultural needs of their students by offering locally relevant curricula, supported by strong school and community partnerships. Review schools had inclusive cultures. However, in some 2015 school reviews, it was evident that there was still a gap in attendance between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. In some schools, community assistance was provided by local Elders in relation to attendance, behaviour and in other areas. For example, in one remote school in Darling Downs South West region, the school leadership team was employing a number of innovative strategies to promote appropriate behaviour, including engaging Elders from the local Indigenous community.

The 2015 school reviews also provided a number of examples of Indigenous-specific school strategies that targeted academic, social and emotional wellbeing. Schools were noted as individually case-managing each of their Indigenous students to ensure that each was on a pathway to success, or appointing specialist staff such as CECs or engaging teacher aides specifically for Indigenous learners. Other strategies included engaging Indigenous youth through sports and the provision of culturally relevant curriculum.

A rural secondary school in Darling Downs South West region was engaging Indigenous boys through Australian Rules football. This had only recently been implemented at the time of the review. The school’s CEC and the program leader were both very optimistic that the program would have a positive impact on the attendance and engagement of Indigenous boys at the school.

Senior Indigenous students who were interviewed as part of a review of their rural secondary school in North Queensland reported that they were regarded as integral, valued members of the school community. They expressed a desire to see National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) celebrations at the school reinvigorated, allowing them to celebrate and share their cultural pride with the entire school community.

Special schools were also supporting their Indigenous students. One special school in Metropolitan region had an Indigenous student population of 12 per cent. The school had an Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Schools committee, which monitored and provided support for Indigenous students within the context of their individual learning programs.

However, some schools had further work to do in fully integrating strategies that supported the needs of their Indigenous students. In an urban secondary school in Metropolitan region, there was little evidence of Indigenous culture being systematically integrated into the curriculum or being celebrated, despite 10 per cent of students identifying as Indigenous Australians. Regardless of this, Indigenous students at this school were achieving on par with non-Indigenous students.

Strategies that schools had implemented were seen to be making a difference. At an urban secondary school in North Coast region, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance had been closed and school leaders attributed this achievement to the effectiveness of the Achieving Results Through Indigenous Education (ARTIE) program. The ARTIE program was also responsible for an improvement in academic outcomes for Indigenous students at the school.

Other contributions to Closing the Gap and Indigenous education identified in the 2015 review schools can be found across this report within other topic areas.