

Getting Clever With Attendance

The Report of the Yarra Schools Network
School Participation Project

Exploring issues of Student Absenteeism

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FOREWORD

Dear Principals, School Council Presidents

I would like to congratulate the Yarra Schools Network for harnessing the goals and objectives of nine diverse inner city schools, and developing a collective response to the shared challenge of improving student attendance. These schools have demonstrated how collective action around a shared policy can produce significant outcomes that impact on student performance. The School Participation Project, underpinned by the *Attendance-Clever School Model*, has effectively supported students, schools and the wider community to meet this challenge.

The Yarra Schools Network includes Abbotsford Primary School, Collingwood College P-12, Collingwood English Language School, Fitzroy Primary School, Lynall Hall Community School, Melbourne Girls' College, Richmond Primary School, Richmond West Primary School and Yarra Primary School. The Victorian Department of Education and Training appreciated the opportunity to support this important school based initiative.

As we all know, research demonstrates that regular school attendance results in higher levels of student engagement, school connectedness and improved educational outcomes. The Department is committed to increasing school attendance and the Office of School Education has identified student attendance as one of its key priorities for 2005-07.

The aim of the project was to address student attendance issues and develop an enhanced 'Network Culture'. The results are impressive: improved attendance rates in all participating schools, increased awareness about attendance, and genuine involvement from parents and community agencies.

The key improvement strategy for the Yarra Network has been the implementation of an evidenced-based approach to student attendance which was planned, implemented and owned by all schools. In addition, Network Working Groups supported the process through professional learning and the sharing of knowledge and resources.

Once again, I would like to congratulate the Yarra Schools Network for the leadership they have demonstrated in effectively addressing this challenging issue.

Sincerely

Darrell Fraser

Deputy Secretary

Office of School Education

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PREAMBLE

Where did we start?

Average number of absence days per student in Yarra Schools Network 2002-2003

Year	Prep	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
2002	17.2	14.4	12.6	10.9	12.1	12.3	14.6	17.3	24	22.1	24.2	22	19.1
2003	19.2	16.3	14.6	15	13.8	15.6	13.6	18.3	23.6	20.6	24.5	19.7	18.9
State 2003	13.1	12.3	12.2	11.9	12.1	12.5	13.2	15.4	18.5	20	18.8	14.3	11.9

Where did we get to?*

Average number of absence days per student in Yarra Schools Network 2004-2005

Year	Prep	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
2004	15.2	14.5	13.1	12.1	10	12	11.6	15.3	19.1	17.4	18.2	19.6	15.4
2005	12.9	11.1	12	11.4	11.3	11.9	11.2	10.3	15.7	18.1	17.4	15.7	13.5
State 2004	13.2	12.6	12.2	11.9	11.9	12.1	12.9	14.5	17.4	19.1	17.6	13.6	11.6

This report outlines how we got there.

INTRODUCTION

This report documents a three-year project that aimed to address growing concerns about student attendance levels in the nine schools of the Yarra Schools Network. The principals of the network wanted to enhance the network culture through a joint approach to the issue of attendance in the Network schools. Network awareness of the benefits of working collaboratively and sharing resources in a joint project underpinned the work.

The work was designed and implemented through the employment of a School Participation Officer. The role of the Officer was to lead and coordinate the nine schools in the development of policies and strategies aimed at improving student attendance data and further developing the links between the Yarra Network Schools. An action research approach was initiated and was intensively supported by RMIT University. The project adopted an evidence-based Network Strategic Plan that was developed and implemented by all schools. Individual schools developed implementation plans using whole school approaches.

The School Participation Project was funded for three years by the Office of School Education for the employment of the School Participation Officer and the ongoing administration and evaluation of the project. This report documents the project by examining the strategies, approaches and outcomes of the work.

SECTION 1

THE SCHOOLS OF THE YARRA SCHOOLS NETWORK

The Yarra Schools Network is a traditionally active group of nine diverse schools in the inner city area of Melbourne. These schools and their profiles are:

Abbotsford Primary School

Abbotsford Primary is a small inner city school located in the City of Yarra and mainly services families from the areas of Richmond, Abbotsford and Collingwood, with a smaller number of students travelling from other areas to attend the school's Chinese Bilingual Program. Abbotsford Primary School was first established in 1877.

The fundamental goal of Abbotsford Primary School is to ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop to their full potential, in a caring, supportive environment in which respect for the rights of everyone is encouraged. The educational, physical and emotional development of each student is a priority and the school provides a challenging environment, which aims to encourage students to become considerate, responsible and self-reliant.

The school community includes busy Victoria Street and its Asian commercial activity. At present our students are predominantly from Vietnamese and Chinese backgrounds with many of the students living in nearby high-rise public housing. Over 80% of the students come from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) where the only English spoken is at school. Over 75% of the school families are in receipt of government assistance through the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA).

To develop the home school partnership parents are actively encouraged to be involved in their children's learning and the life of the school through cultural and student activities.

The school provides a comprehensive curriculum in all key-learning areas, with a strong focus on Literacy, Numeracy and Learning Technologies. An English as Second Language (ESL) specialist program runs through the school from years Prep-6. Our school values the learning of other languages and all students are given the opportunity to enter the well-supported English/Chinese Bilingual program or to learn Vietnamese or Chinese in Language Other Than English (LOTE) classes.

Collingwood College P-12

Collingwood College is the only Prep to 12 college in the City of Yarra, and is one of three public secondary schools in this inner city local council area. It has a current enrolment of 540, which includes a diverse student population, socio-economically, ethnically and culturally. It has first class facilities and superior resources supporting its curriculum.

To prevent students from feeling overwhelmed by the Prep to 12 structure, students are given a sense of place through the college's separate Junior (Prep to 5), Middle (year 6 to 8) and Senior (year 9 to VCE) sub schools.

Collingwood College is an accredited international school (CIAS) and is committed to being a school that motivates each student to pursue learning by continually thinking productively at the highest level.

The College offers four streams:

- Prep-12 primarily based on VELS but incorporating a Reggio Emilia inspired approach to learning in Junior School.
- Prep to 10 based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner.
- The Island Work Education Unit offering education and training for students over 15 years of age who wish to develop the skills to undertake apprenticeships or traineeships.
- Collingwood Alternative School for students 13 years to 16 years who have experienced problems in conventional schooling.

Collingwood English Language School

Collingwood English Language School (CELS) is a major provider of the New Arrivals Program in the Northern Metropolitan Region. It is a combined primary and secondary school, which provides full time, intensive English courses for newly arrived migrants and refugees prior to their enrolment in a mainstream school or further education.

The school's target enrolment base is 78 secondary students and 39 primary students with the period of enrolment for students varying from 6-12 months depending on individual student needs. Students enrol at any time there are vacancies and exit at the end of a term.

The main aim of the school's program is to provide a cooperative and supportive learning and working environment to enable students to develop the language and skills they require to move successfully into mainstream schooling. CELS is committed to building on what students know, taking account of different learning styles and rates of learning. A secondary aim is to introduce students to Australian society and culture. The school values the diversity and richness of cultures represented in the school and implements policies that support the provisions of racial and religious tolerance, sexual harassment and equal opportunity legislation.

Underpinning all school policy is recognition of the importance of developing self-confidence, respect for the rights of others and self-responsibility, as well as promoting sensitivity and tolerance as characteristics of school life.

Fitzroy Primary School

Fitzroy Primary School is an inner city school, which has been providing education for its communities for 150 years. It has two campuses with the Prep – 2 students occupying the Junior School on the Napier St. site and the main campus on the George St. site, including a double story brick building of historical significance.

Fitzroy PS is characterised by the rich diversity of its community with a very large multicultural component of its population of 127 students. The manner in which the school acknowledges and values the range of ethnic backgrounds has resulted in a responsive and inclusive school community. The school has consistently been identified as Like Schools group 9 school with a three-year EMA average of 0.866 and a three-year LOTE average of 0.626.

Fitzroy Primary School therefore presents a range of educational and social challenges to its professional staff. In recognition of this Fitzroy is a recipient of additional funding under the TSI initiative.

A local complex of high-rise public housing units attracts a large number of migrant and refugee families who in turn send their children to Fitzroy Primary. As families become more established they seek more permanent accommodation beyond the school and as result mobility is very high.

A very high percentage of students attending the school have experienced migration, detention, and refugee status, speak English as a second language and /or come from very low socio-economic backgrounds. Many of the children who attend the school may not be literate in their own language and indeed may not have participated in a preschool program.

A number of families are highly transient with many starting school at very different times of the year and there is the added challenge of many families returning to their homelands after a period of establishment to visit family or to bring them back to Australia.

Lynall Hall Community School

Lynall Hall Community School is a small school located in Richmond, with convenient access to all forms of transport. Lynall Hall caters for students who for a variety of reasons are seeking an alternative to mainstream schooling.

Lynall Hall provides an alternative secondary education to an enrolment of approximately 100 students from across the metropolitan area. The school's size and pragmatic blending of social and academic learning are key

ingredients to its ability to service the needs of otherwise disengaged students.

Lynall Hall Community School provides a broad curriculum encompassing relevant aspects of the Key Learning Areas for Years 7- 10 with a balanced mix of core and elective studies. A range of VCE and VET subjects is offered at years 11 and 12 and students in year 10 have the opportunity to study at least one VCE or VET subject. There is also considerable flexibility in teaching strategies.

Opportunities for positive interaction with the wider community are provided, including camps, excursions, and work experience and community service. Excellent school facilities ensure a wide range of practical, expressive and academic activities.

A Daily Lunch Club operates to ensure students are able to enjoy a nutritious meal or snack in a friendly atmosphere. The school has access to local facilities such as Richmond Recreation Centre's gymnasium and swimming pool, football oval and Yarra bike paths.

As members of a school community which emphasizes mutual trust and goal based learning strategies it is considered important that students develop productive behaviour and attitudes, enhanced skills and abilities, and realistic views of their strengths and weaknesses.

Melbourne Girls' College

Located beside the Yarra River in Richmond, Melbourne Girls' College was established in 1994, with the aim of providing an exemplary environment for the education of girls. In emphasizing Science and Technology, with a focus on students developing Scientific and Technological literacy during their middle years, the curriculum provides opportunities for girls to prepare for leadership roles in areas where women have been traditionally under-represented. The emphasis on Information and Communication Technologies is incorporated across all areas of the curriculum.

With an enrolment of 1220 students, the college is divided into two sub-schools: Middle (Years 7 to 9) and Senior (Years 10 to 12). In the Middle school, students experience a curriculum incorporating interdisciplinary, integrated units where the focus changes according to the different developmental needs of the learners. The Senior School offers a wide range of VCE and VET options. Literacy and Numeracy Support programs operate in the Middle School. A whole school daily mentoring program has been implemented to scaffold the development of students' social competencies and to enhance their understanding of and their ability to take control of their own learning.

The College provides an extensive co-curricular program to meet the educational, developmental and social needs of the girls at all levels.

Richmond Primary School

The vision of Richmond Primary School promotes integrity, lifelong learning and attainment of excellence. The values that form the basis of our actions are, integrity, trust, cooperation, self-esteem, excellence, learning and respect.

Richmond Primary School is located in Richmond, an inner suburb of Melbourne. The school was opened in 1874. In the late 80's Brighton Street, Burnley Primary School and Cremorne Street Primary were amalgamated and the new Richmond Primary School was formed.

The current enrolment is 168 and it is anticipated that the enrolment will increase over the next five years. The majority of the students are from the immediate locality, but a significant proportion of the enrolment comes from outside this area. The demographics of the school are changing with many two professional working parent families replacing a highly multi-cultural community. Whilst the school still has a multi-cultural presence, many of the children come from second and third generation migrant families. The school provides excellent programs in all areas of the curriculum but is very highly regarded in the area of The Arts.

The organisation of classes varies, depending on the numbers of children at each level, gender balance, maintaining friendship groups and ensuring that there is equal distribution of ability throughout the grades. Usually grades are composite groups, which encourage and enhance individual achievement and social development.

Over the past three years one of the school's priorities has been to improve our Information Technology Program by providing ongoing professional development for staff, and adequate hardware and software resources. We are well resourced with computers (1:2 ratio), and support ICT hardware such as digital cameras, scanners, and data projectors. We have a well-documented whole school program, which encourages regular and consistent usage and enhances classroom programs and student learning.

We have a strong focus on student wellbeing and value the "You Can Do It" program which is consistently implemented across the school. The behavior of the students both in class and in the playgrounds reflects high expectations and a consistent approach to discipline. The development of excellent leadership skills in our senior students is a planned and monitored process and their input into the life of the school is crucial.

In striving for continuous improvement, Richmond Primary School is committed to maximising the educational opportunities for all students, with ongoing staff professional learning playing a vital role in achieving this.

Richmond West Primary School

Richmond West Primary School is located in the North Richmond public housing estate. 68% of families are eligible to receive the Education Maintenance Allowance and 88% of students are from families with a non-English speaking background. The school is in Like Schools Group 9. The current enrolment is 150 students. The predominant ethnic groups are Chinese, East Timorese, and Vietnamese. The first Sudanese students were enrolled during 2005.

A highlight of the curriculum is the well-established bilingual program that supports and encourages children in the development of their first language, as well as English as a second language. The English/Chinese bilingual program operates in Years P-2, and the English/Vietnamese program operates in Years P-1. The school also offers two comprehensive LOTE programs – Chinese in Years 3-6, and Vietnamese in Years 2-6.

The school strongly focuses on literacy and numeracy teaching, and uses an integrated curriculum approach in its teaching and learning programs. The integration of ICT into classroom teaching strategies has enhanced student skills and learning outcomes.

The school places a high priority on student welfare focusing on attendance, engagement and wellbeing.

Yarra Primary School

Yarra Primary School is located in the City of Yarra at the northern end of Richmond. A state primary school has been operating on this site since 1888 providing schooling for the children of the changing community.

A commitment to providing the community with accessible educational resources and responding to the educational needs of the community is the underlying ethos of the school.

Richmond has undergone many changes over the last 113 years and provided residence to many different communities. The changes in demographics have resulted in a static population for several years of between 120 and 130, but prep enrolments are increasing and commercial developments close to the school could result in increased enrolments from parents working in the area.

The school community includes Victoria Street and its Asian commercial activity and the Greek precinct around Swan Street. The school population reflects this rich diversity of cultural, social and economic backgrounds.

Approximately 50% of students come from backgrounds where English is not the main language. The school also has a high transitory population, partially

due to the high number of surrounding rental properties, but also as a result of a women's refuge and community housing in the local area. The school is committed to meeting the special needs of these families. In addition, 45% of the families using the school are eligible for Educational Maintenance Allowance.

The staff is committed to the maintenance of an inclusive learning environment that engages students in the process of becoming active, independent and skilled learners who are involved in and enjoy school life. We are committed to active partnerships among students, parents/carers and staff. The intention of these partnerships is to achieve successful outcomes, both academic and personal, for all children regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio economic background or other special needs.

The school provides a comprehensive curriculum in English and Mathematics, with an emphasis on ensuring all students develop sound understandings in the early years. The staff has developed a two year integrated curriculum that ensures the coverage of Science, Studies of Society, Health and Technology. All children participate in the language program learning either Mandarin Chinese or Modern Greek. The school's specialist program includes Music, Visual Arts, Drama, Personal Development, Physical Education, Learning Technologies and Library. The students also learn leadership skills and responsibility for others through the Junior School Council, the Big Buddy system, cross age classes and the Peer Support Program.

The community is committed, through the School Council and its committees, to regularly reviewing policies, priorities and program to ensure that all children are provided with the ideal environment and the necessary support to maximise success in all learning areas and social development.

SECTION 2

HOW DID THE PROJECT OPERATE?

2.1 Why was the project established?

The nine principals of the Yarra Schools Network have traditionally been an active collegiate group, meeting at least twice each month. In early 2003, whilst defining their own role and possible future directions as a group, a shared vision was recognised. The group wished to further develop the links between the nine schools, and in doing so, work towards the development of an enhanced “Network Culture”.

The group recognised that the most effective approach would be to establish some shared work or project between the schools. At this point, the group actively sought and gained Department of Education and Training funding through the Office of School Education to establish a Network project. In doing this, the group discerned some common emerging challenges and recognised that the most concerning of these were rising levels of student absenteeism, and high levels of student and parent disengagement in Network schools.

2.2 How was the project established?

The Principal Network Group decided to establish a three-year pilot project to address these concerns, and to broaden the community partnerships between schools, the City of Yarra, and other local support agencies. It was decided that the ultimate aim of the project was to increase student attendance in schools within the network, and that the focus strategy would be the employment of a project officer to coordinate the various aspects of the project. The larger part of the allocated funding would be used to fund the employment of the project officer with a smaller amount allocated for the initial set up and the ongoing costs of administering and evaluating the project.

The major focus of the project became the appointment of a **School Participation Officer** to implement the pilot program.

It was decided that the main role of Officer would be to coordinate the components of the School Participation Project working with the participating schools, teachers, families and/or carers to develop strategies which improve attendance at school, promote school retention and engagement, and provide coordinated support to the target group, their families and/or carers. (Appendix 1)

The group held discussions about the desired qualities of the person to be employed, and recognised that although the person would be employed as a School Services Officer, it would be beneficial to employ an educator who had

broad experience in schools in both curriculum and student wellbeing school improvement initiatives. They identified that the educator needed to have well-developed leadership and communication skills and needed to demonstrate a flexible and well-organised approach.

2.3 Project phases and timeline.

Fig.1 Timeline of the Yarra Schools Network School Participation Project

Phase 1 Planning	Phase 2 Implementation	Phase 3 Evaluation
<p><i>Project office established</i></p> <p><i>Project officer and evaluator appointed</i></p> <p><i>Steering Group established</i></p> <p><i>Conceptual framework developed</i></p> <p>Situational Analysis completed</p> <p>Initial professional learning for staff</p> <p>Target Group defined</p> <p>Strategic Plan developed</p> <p>Referral protocols established</p>	<p>Attendance Working Group, Transition and Wellbeing Groups Established</p> <p>Attendance Improvement Implementation Plans developed for each school</p> <p>Implementation of strategies as outlined in the Network Strategic Plan</p> <p>Ongoing Professional Learning for staff.</p> <p>Ongoing evaluation of project direction</p> <p>Links developed with other projects</p> <p>Project informed wider community and was widely profiled</p>	<p><i>Project Officer work completed</i></p> <p><i>Project materials published</i></p> <p><i>Future directions established</i></p> <p><i>Evaluation and evaluation report completed</i></p>
July 2003	December 2003	December 2005
		July 2006

Phase 1 - Planning (July 2003- December 2003)

The **School Participation Officer** was appointed and the project office was established at Richmond West Primary School. The project office had an independent telephone line and facilities for the safe storage of project materials and confidential files. Although located in school premises, it was recognised that the work of this office was independent of the base school.

The **Project Steering Group** was established. The group consisted of the nine principals of the network schools, the Northern Metropolitan Region Senior Education Officer and the School Participation Officer. It was agreed that the project officer would submit written reports to the group on a monthly basis. The role of this group was to oversee the work of the School Participation Officer and the implementation of all project strategies.

The **Project Evaluator** from RMIT University was appointed. The School Participation Officer and the project evaluator established meetings on a twice-monthly basis to develop and implement procedures for the ongoing evaluation of the project. This involved:

- The collection of relevant data.
- Reflection on approach and direction so that the evaluation process continually informed the project
- Mentoring of the School Participation Officer by the evaluator. This assisted the identification of successful and less successful approaches, and therefore supported the School Participation Officer in better meeting the competing demands of the project work.

Initially, the School Participation Officer completed a search for good practice models and established links between the project and existing attendance improvement programs. Ongoing relationships were established with two widely recognised good practice initiatives, the Hume Whittlesea *Tackling Student Absenteeism* project and the Northern Metropolitan Region *Improving Student Attendance* professional development program.

The officer also completed a situational analysis in each school. This was achieved through focus sessions with the principals, staff and students of each school, analysis of current attendance data and parent and student opinion survey data, as well as audits of existing attendance policies and current procedures.

The most prevalent type of student absence recognised in all schools, other than illness, was overwhelmingly that of “Parent Condoned Absenteeism” or “Parent Withdrawal” with much fewer absences being due to “Truancy” or “School Refusal”. (See section 3) This data demonstrated the need for implementation of holistic approaches in schools, including community education and intensive support of individual parents and students.

A conceptual framework was developed. It was agreed that the project would operate within a proactive **primary prevention** and **early intervention** framework, with an emphasis on a **whole school approach** in each school, whilst at the same time adopting a **whole network** mindset. Accordingly, a Network Strategic Plan was developed and ratified by the Steering group.

The project strategies as outlined in the project Three-Year Strategic Plan were:

1. Develop, implement and evaluate a systematic approach that addresses the need to increase attendance and retention across all levels (P-12).
2. Develop professional development programs that focus on primary and early intervention strategies.
3. Provide coordinated support to targeted young people, their teachers, and families and/or carers to improve attendance, retention and learning outcomes.
4. Build community links and partnerships and strengthen cooperation between Network schools through the development of collaborative programs aimed at increasing student attendance and engagement.
5. Further encourage the participation of parents/carers in school and community activities.
6. Demonstrate that the role of School Participation Officer is an effective means of increasing student attendance and engagement throughout a Network of schools.

A target group criteria statement was established and endorsed by the Steering Group. It was agreed that the target group was **students P-12 who exhibit patterns of irregular school attendance, defined as a total of five days absence from school in the previous six months, which has not been explained to the school's satisfaction**. Particular focus was to be given to the primary years in general and in particular Prep where an increasing rate of absence had been identified. A major focus was also to be on the years 5-9 where Network data also revealed worrying trends.

It was recognised that there were some cases of chronic absenteeism in each of the network schools. It was agreed that although the main focus of the project was to be on prevention, the Officer would also work with the schools in providing improved support for these cases, including referral to outside community agencies.

Protocols for service delivery of the School Participation Officer resource were developed for each school. It was agreed that the main role of the Officer was to work collaboratively with the principals and staff of the nine network schools in the implementation of the project strategies. It was envisaged that this would involve the Officer trialling and modelling various approaches. It was agreed that the service delivery should be kept cooperative and flexible,

allowing the Officer to service the schools in response to project needs and priorities. The Officer therefore attended some schools in a regular timeslot each week, whilst other schools were serviced on an “on call” basis.

The School Participation Officer facilitated initial professional learning activities with staff in each school. These were carried out in short sessions in staff meetings and were aimed at raising awareness and providing procedural training, as well as contributing staff focus feedback data for the situational analysis.

Phase 2 – Implementation (January 2004- December 2005)

In January 2004 the **Attendance Working Group** was established. Membership was made up of the School Participation Officer, a representative from each school, and a representative from DE&T Northern Metropolitan Regional Office. The school representatives were those who were responsible for the development and review of attendance policy and procedures in each school, as well as for the monitoring and analysis of attendance data leading to the identification and support of students with attendance difficulties. These representatives were normally either Assistant Principals or Leading Teachers.

This group met at least once each term and was responsible for:

- The implementation of network strategies as outlined in the project strategic plan
- The development and implementation of an individual improvement plan in each school.
- The development of common protocols and approaches across the network schools.
- Professional development in Network schools on attendance and engagement issues.
- The sharing of best practice models, knowledge and resources between network schools.

The School Participation Officer liaised with each school representative in the development of an Attendance Improvement Implementation Plan using a whole school approach. To complement the work of this group, other network project groups were established and are now fully operational. These included:

Student Wellbeing: This group comprised the staff in each school responsible for the development of student wellbeing policies and programs as well as for the ongoing support of individual students and their families. The group initially met on a monthly basis in the local Schools and Agencies

Together Forum and formed an enthusiastic collegiate group. They have since formed their own forum. The group explored current wellbeing issues and shared knowledge and resources for preventative programs, and through discussion of the causal factors of absenteeism developed shared ideas and strategies for improved support for students and their families in network schools. The group acknowledged that they were sometimes working with the same families, and as a result, joint casework approaches and meetings were established.

Year 6 Student Transition: This group comprised mainly year 6 teachers who met to develop an enhanced transition program for network year 6 students. This program involved two types of activities:

- A two-day program for all year 6 students held in one of the Network schools. The first day of the program provided social situations for students to meet other students going to the same destination school before the official orientation activity. The second day, held after the orientation visits, gave students opportunities to explore transition issues and gain a more detailed understanding of the secondary school environment. This was achieved through small group discussion with other students led by experienced personnel from secondary schools in conjunction with the year 6 teachers.
- An informal program where arrangements were made between network schools for additional orientation visits and activities and for the exchange of basic information about individual students.

Bursars and data entry personnel: This group comprised the personnel involved in business management and data entry in each school. They held breakfast meetings and focused on the exchange of information as well as establishing arrangements for informal contact with each other for ongoing mutual support.

The project also worked in conjunction with other network groups established through the Innovations and Excellence Program. These groups included the **Innovations and Excellence Working Group**, the **MYPRAD Group** and the **Early Years Teachers Group**. School representatives on these groups were Network teachers who met to establish common professional learning activities, and to share ideas, pedagogy and classroom programs. The School Participation Officer also liaised with an **Early Childhood Transitions Group**, which comprised the network prep teachers and met in the context of a local City of Yarra forum of Prep and early childhood teachers.

Also in this implementation phase of the project, individual Network schools implemented an attendance policy review process. This involved collaboration and consultation across the community. The process in the primary schools was less complex than that employed in the secondary schools where the review spanned several months. The policy review process involved:

- Close analysis of data to determine policy direction
- Research on policies developed in other schools

- Intensive PD with members of staff, most notably year level coordinators and level team leaders
- Focus groups and surveys amongst the student population
- Consultation with parent groups
- Consultation with staff groups and discussion at staff meetings
- Preparation and refinement of draft policy documents
- Endorsement of final policy documents by school community groups

The policy documents generally included school statements of belief, government and school expectations, articulation of daily and cyclical practices, and clearly defined statements of roles and responsibilities of the different groups within the school community. It was recognised that each school needed to have a current and active student attendance policy and that the policies needed to be clearly articulated to all members of the school community. The need for regular policy review was also recognised.

As a result of the policy work in the schools, a **Network Attendance Protocol** was developed, ratified and implemented (Appendix 2). It was envisaged that this protocol would assist in making consistent statements to the local community and would lead to the production of more reliable and accurate Network attendance data. As well as defining and articulating shared values and beliefs, this protocol involved Network schools establishing agreement on common procedures such the use of CASES 21 codes and also agreed definitions of the different types of absence, including what constitutes “lateness”. (See Section 3)

The main focus in this middle phase of the project was the improvement work in individual schools. Both school and Network strategies were trialled, implemented and evaluated. All of the established Network groups provided rigorous professional learning and the sharing of ideas and resources. (Details of this work are outlined in sections 4 and 5 of this report)

The School Participation Officer attended all network group meetings and also visited each school on a regular basis to work with principals and individual school teams. This involved the Officer in the following:

Consultation: Providing strategic advice to individual principals and school teams on the implementation of the schools’ action plans as well as advice on individual student and family cases.

Mentoring: Meeting informally with individual staff members to provide support and advice on the implementation of school strategies as well as on work with individual students and families.

Modelled leadership: Attending casework meetings with staff, parents and students and modelling collaborative, supportive and effective approaches. The School Participation Officer also delivered community education presentations at parent information sessions to model effective scripts and approaches.

Training: Working with data entry personnel, Working Group members and principals to improve understanding and skills in data entry and management, as well as regular data interpretation and analysis. This included the correct use of the CASES 21 attendance package and the other electronic roll marking systems. The School Participation Officer also assisted in the analysis of annual data through the use of Excel spreadsheets and the production of Annual Attendance reports using summary graphs.

Liaison and linkage: Providing a connection between the Network groups and schools, facilitating and supporting the flow of information and the sharing of knowledge, learnings, casework and resources. The School Participation Officer was also able to connect individual staff and programs in network schools with schools and community agencies outside of the Network.

Support: Supporting school teams in casework with individual students and parents. This was achieved in some schools through School Participation Officer membership of Student Welfare forums where the Officer was able to provide secondary consultation to welfare staff and individual teachers on approaches for particular cases. The Officer also attended meetings with students and parents to provide the authority of an 'external voice'. Schools made referrals to the Officer for backup with individual cases, with contact made by phone calls and letters. The Officer also made home visits, accompanied by school personnel, when necessary.

Communication: Documenting the project through the production of the following reports:

- Initial Report to Principals (August 2003)
- The School Participation Officer Three-Year Strategic Plan (August 2003)
- Annual and interim reports
- Annual Student Attendance reports in each school
- Detailed Monthly Progress reports to principals and schools
- Minutes of all Network group meetings
- PowerPoint presentations and other summary materials
- The *Getting Clever With Attendance* Report (September 2006)

Ongoing evaluation: Integral to this phase of the project was ongoing evaluation using an action research approach. This involved regular meetings between the School Participation Officer and the project evaluator. Project direction and strategies were continually discussed and identifiable success and challenges were monitored. The evaluator also provided personal support and advice to the Officer. The Officer and the evaluator attended network group meetings and provided opportunity for reflection and evaluative discussion on all aspects of the project. The Project Steering Group and the Attendance Working Group were central to this process.

Production: Working with Network Groups and individual schools in the production of written resources such as information brochures, newsletter items, parent information sheets, tools, school policy documents and the network protocol (See Appendices and Resources).

Information: Informing the wider educational community through sharing the identified learnings of the project. This was achieved through the School Participation Officer and Working Group personnel presenting information to various forums including:

- The Northern Metropolitan Region *Improving Student Attendance* Professional learning activities.
- A planning group establishing strategic direction for attendance improvement in the Northern Metropolitan Region.
- The Northern Metropolitan Region Attendance Reference Group
- Meetings with the General Manager of the School Reform Division and the Deputy Secretary of the Office of School Education
- The Hume Whittlesea *Tackling Student Absenteeism* forums
- The *It's Not OK to be Away* Regional Support Group
- The Western Metropolitan Region Quality Teachers Program
- The Eastern Metropolitan Region Professional Learning Forum.
- School Focused Youth Service forums
- The Northern Metropolitan Region School Support Services Officer Annual Conference
- Northern Metropolitan Region Principals' Networks
- The Northern and Western Schools Health Promotions Networks
- The Yarra Youth Forum
- The Yarra *Early Childhood Transitions Group*
- The Yarra *Agencies and Schools Together* forum

The School Participation Officer was also able to support the provision of information on other good practice projects and programs back to the Network and network schools.

Profiling: Supporting the promotion of the project both within the Network and in the wider community. The project is now widely recognised as a good practice model particularly in the Northern Metropolitan Region. The Project is featured on the Northern Metropolitan Region website and has been written up in the *It's Not Okay to be Away* kit and the Hume Whittlesea *Tackling Student Absenteeism* report.

The project has also been featured in the media including, *Education Age* (22/5/06) *Education Times* (20/10/05) and *Stateline* (ABC TV)(28/7/06)

Phase 3 – Evaluation and Future Directions (January 2006- July 2006)

The main focus for this phase was the close analysis of all individual school and network data including and the production of the project report *Getting Clever With Attendance*.

A key priority of this phase has been the establishment of strategies and priorities for addressing issues of the sustainability of the work established by the project. This has involved:

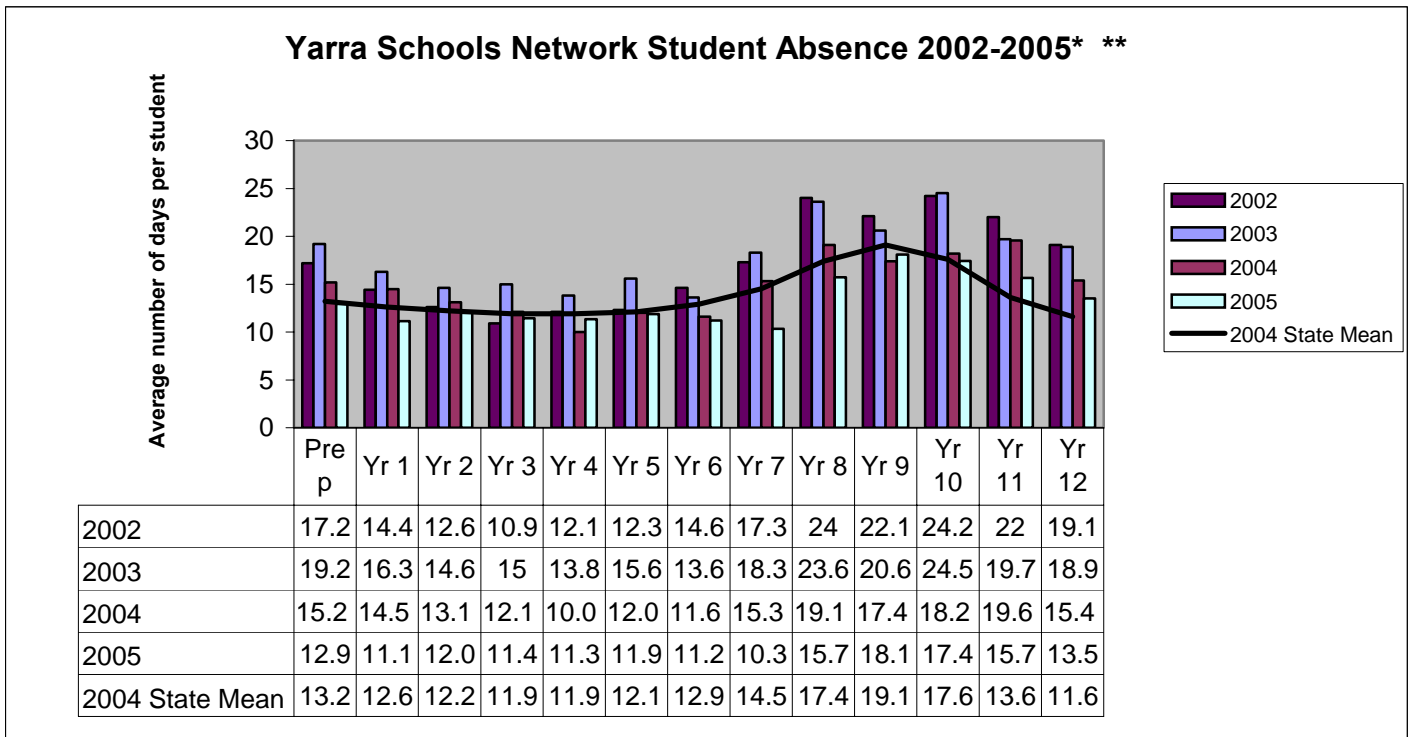
- Development of clear understandings and statements of the roles and future operation of each of the project groups.
- Dissemination of all project resources and tools to all network schools
- Ongoing Professional Learning sessions for all network groups and staff in all schools
- Discussion of the key findings of the project work and the implications for the Network and for individual schools.
- Consolidation of the links between the Network and other Attendance improvement projects including Northern Metropolitan Region initiatives and the *It's Not OK to be Away* program.

SECTION 3

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT STUDENT ABSENCE IN THE YARRA SCHOOLS NETWORK?

In the initial phase of the project, the School Participation Officer facilitated a situational analysis in each school. One method of gathering data was the initiation of focused sessions facilitated by the officer and including principals, staff and students of each school. Other methods included, past and current attendance data, school level report data, parent and student opinion survey results, as well as information attained through audits of existing attendance policies and current procedures.

3.1 Network Absence Data



* The DE&T calculated network absence data was not available at the time of this report. The 2005 figures are based on manual calculations using individual School Level Report data

** The School Participation Project operated from July 2003 to July 2006

3.2 What does the Network absence data show?

The *Yarra Schools Network Student Absence 2002-2005* graph presents student absence data, which is annually provided to networks by DE&T. It was the routine annual analysis of this data that provided the impetus for the action of the Yarra Network. The data for 2002 and 2003 is the pre data for the project and shows a definite and steady increase in student absence rates

in both primary and secondary schools. The peak in absence rates in 2003 clearly demonstrates the trend that the Network was responding to in establishing this project

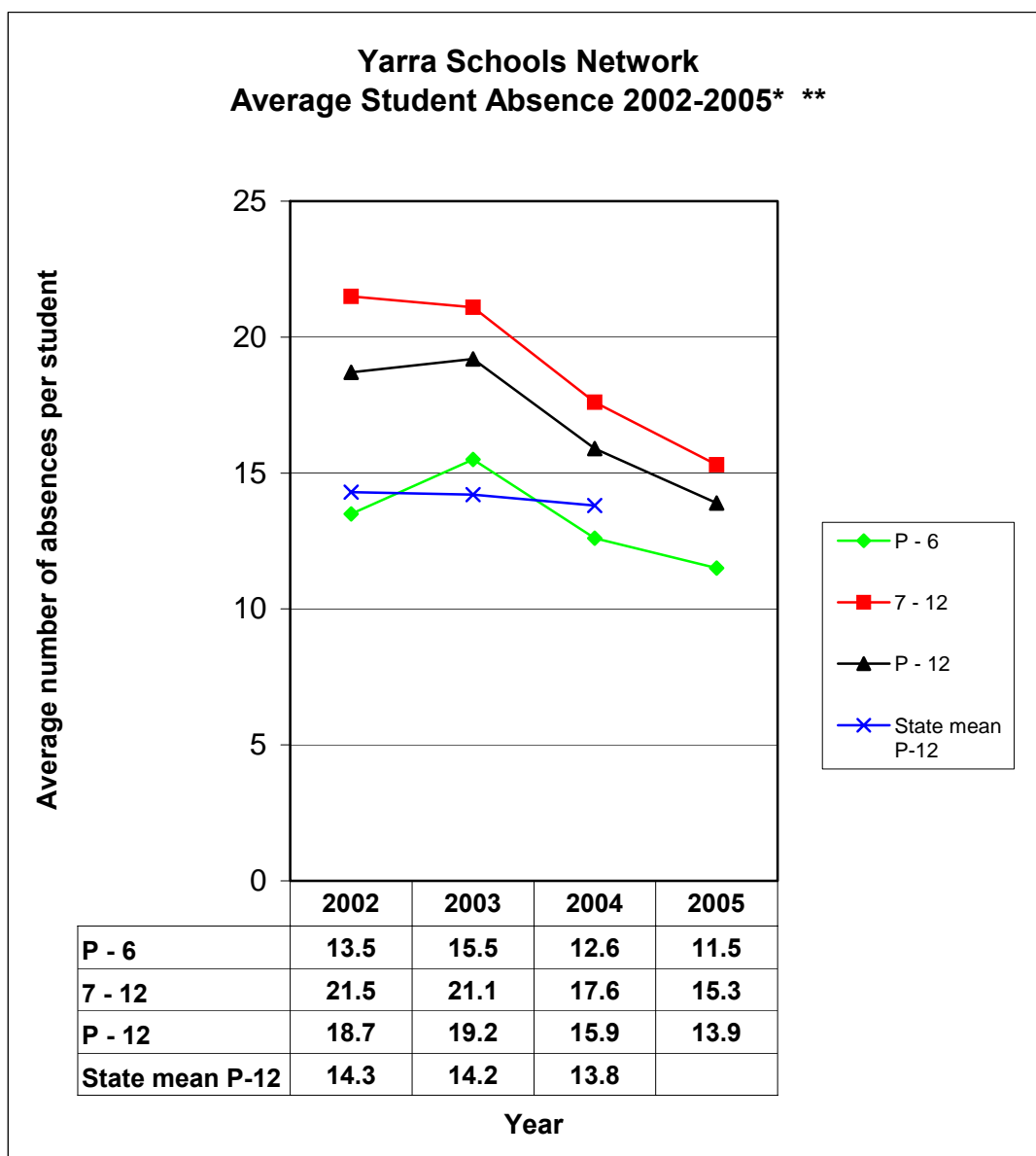
It can be seen that overall student absence levels have steadily declined since the implementation of the School Participation Project strategies in January 2004. The data indicates that by the end of 2005, all levels from Prep to Year 10 were below the 2004 State means.

The data also shows that all year levels have experienced a decrease of at least two days per student. The biggest improvements have been achieved at years 7, 8 and 10, with improvements of 7-8 days per student. This is particularly pleasing given that this data includes absence figures for three alternative settings included at these levels. The improvement of 4.3 days per student at Prep level is also worth noting. Years Prep and years 5 to year 9 were specifically targeted by this project.

Overall success of the project strategies is indicated by the Network Prep to 12 average of 13.9 days per student an improvement of 5.3 days per student. The 2005 average is close to the 2004 State benchmark of 13.8 days per student.

The absence rates at years 11 and 12 are an ongoing challenge to the network secondary schools. It is however felt that these figures are not a true reflection of student attendance at these levels. The schools report that they have experienced difficulties in gaining accurate data due to flexible student movement and hours. These schools are now implementing period-by-period electronic roll marking procedures to address this situation.

In conclusion it should be noted that individual school annual absence data (not included in this report) indicates that all schools have achieved a decrease in student absence rates. Some individual primary schools have achieved as much as a fifty percent decrease. In addition, some schools have absence rates at individual year levels that are now amongst the lowest in the state.



* The DE&T calculated network absence data was not available at the time of this report. The 2005 figures are based on manual calculations using individual School Level Report data.

** The School Participation Project operated from July 2003 to July 2006.

3.3 What are the types of student absence identified in the Network? - Some definitions

The Attendance Working Group recognised the importance of all Network schools having a common understanding when talking about the different types of student absence. As a result, the group developed the following definitions:

1. Illness – Absence where a medical condition prevents normal activity.

Illness is the most common reason given for student absence in all Yarra Network Schools and is accepted as ‘explained’ absence. Illness can be short-term and long-term and includes conditions that require quarantine. This type of absence should be supported by documentation. Frequent or long-term illness can mask or lead to other attendance issues.

2. Lateness and early leaving – Absence where a student is not present for the entire day due to either arriving late or leaving early.

The Yarra Network Schools classify a student as late if they arrive at school after the commencement of school but before 10 a.m. and as early leaving if they leave after 2 p.m. Students arriving after 10 a.m. or leaving before 2 p.m. are classified as being absent for half a day.

3. Parent condoned or parent withdrawal - Absence where the parent allows or contributes to the child’s absence

This type of absence accounts for a high proportion of absences in the Network schools, particularly in the primary schools. It describes absence caused by parents either allowing or encouraging their children to stay home and can be a symptom of families experiencing social and emotional problems, parenting challenges as well as poor parent attitudes to education.

4. Extended family holiday - Absence where the student accompanies the family on trip or holiday during school time

This type of absence accounts for a large number of absences in some Network schools particularly in schools with large numbers of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The absences can be both long and short term and have differing reasons ranging from skiing trips through to overseas family reunion visits spanning several months.

5. Partial Truancy – Absence when students absent themselves for part of the day or for particular lessons

Students with this type of absence are usually marked as present at the beginning of the day but absent themselves for part of the day. Some students attempt to leave the school premises whilst others hide themselves within the school. This is almost non-existent in primary schools but can be a common practice in secondary schools. Students who do this regularly are often disinterested and avoidant as a result of

experiencing challenges in their learning and/or social relationships. It can be evidence of ineffective student monitoring procedures.

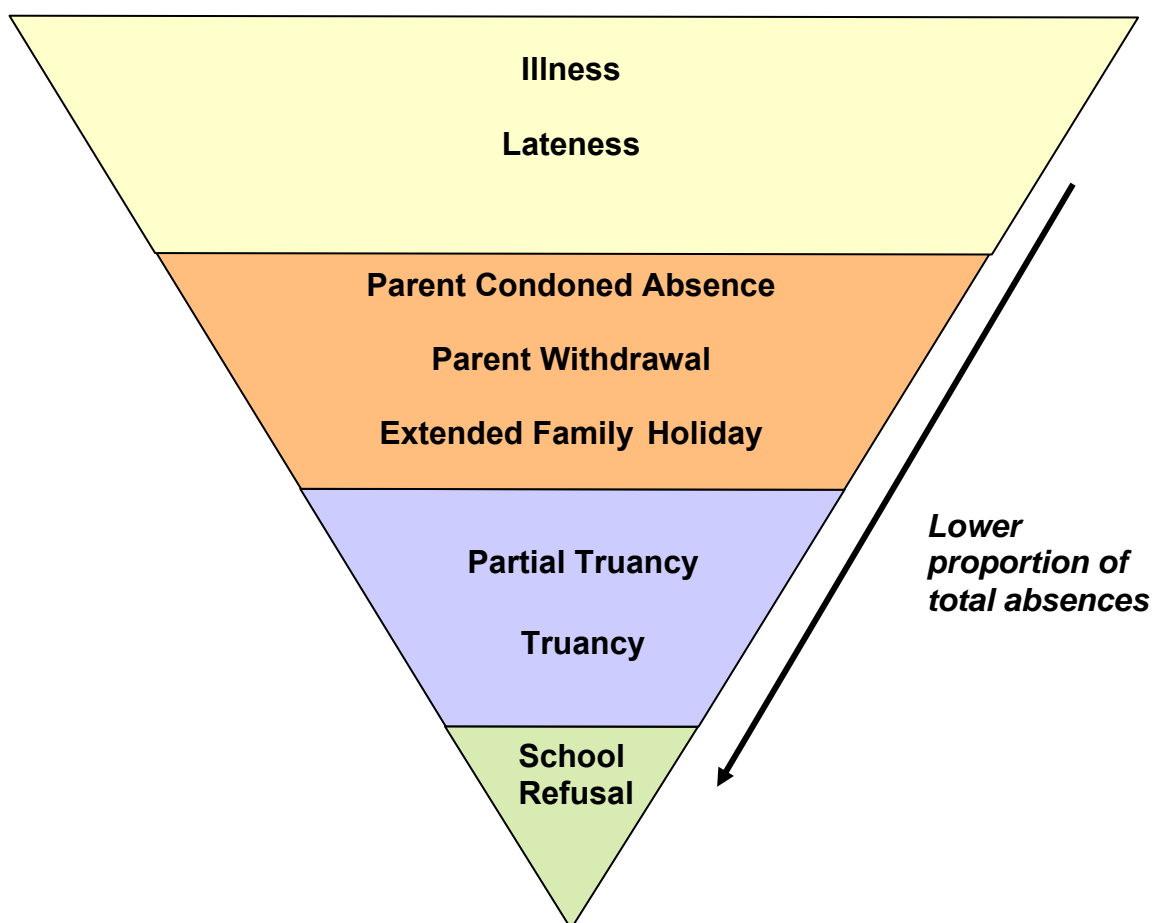
6. Truancy - Absence where parents are unaware of the child's non-attendance

This is unauthorised absence where the students make some attempts to hide their absence to both the school and their parents. This type of absence is more common in Network secondary settings. Some students display quite definite patterns. In Network schools it was found that truants are more likely to be experiencing behavioural or learning difficulties and/or are from families experiencing economic and social challenges.

7. School refusal - Absence caused by excessive anxiety in student as diagnosed by health professionals

This type of absence describes students who demonstrate a reluctance or refusal to attend school despite the fact that their parents are making efforts to get them there. It is usually a symptom of severe emotional upset caused by factors including social problems with peers including bullying, traumatic events, personal illness, academic challenges and problems with adult relationships at school. This type of absence can result from students not reintegrating after extended absence and accounts for only a small percentage of absences in the Yarra Schools Network where it has a higher incidence in the secondary settings, notably at years 8 and 9.

Yarra Schools Network - Types of Student Absence



Illness

Medical condition prevents normal activity.

Lateness and early leaving

Student is not present for the entire day

Parent condoned or parent withdrawal

The parent allows or contributes to the child's absence

Extended family holiday

The student accompanies family on trip or holiday during school time

Partial Truancy

Students absent themselves without school or parent knowledge for part of the day or for particular lessons

Truancy

The parents are unaware of the child's non-attendance

School refusal

Student not wanting to come to school due to excessive anxiety

3.4 What are the causal factors for student absence in the Network?

Student absenteeism needs to be recognised as a symptom of something that is affecting a student's life. When a school is developing strategies for improving attendance for both individual students and for the school as a whole, it is very important to have an overview and a detailed understanding of the different causal factors affecting absence in the school. Focus sessions and attendance meetings and interviews, facilitated by the School Participation Officer and staff of individual schools, provided valuable information on the factors contributing to student absenteeism. These sessions involved secondary and upper primary students and described the following causal factors:

Lack of parental support This included parents placing a low value on the student's education or being too preoccupied or busy to fully support the student.

Home organizational difficulties Many students reported that they suffered from a lack of routine with many staying up late at night. They also talked of difficulties getting themselves organised and ready to get to school on time each day, particularly when parents had already left for work.

Social difficulties at home Some students talked about relationship and monetary challenges faced by their families having an impact on their ability to focus on school.

Social difficulties at school including bullying and harassment Some students talked about staying away from school in order to avoid friendship problems and in some cases to avoid other students who were either harassing or bullying them.

Lack of motivation and direction Some secondary students reported that they were absent from school because they were uncertain of where they were headed and could not really see the value of their studies at school.

Poor monitoring and follow up of absences by school Secondary students especially recognised that failure by the school to adequately follow up their absences made it easy for them to take days off school. They reported ease of missing particular classes. Some students indicated that they were able at times to leave the school premises and go into the city. They were amazed that few adults would challenge them being out of school and were particularly amazed at being able to walk past police personnel whilst in school uniform.

Students also reported that roll monitors were frequently pressured by students to alter rolls in order to cover partial truancy. Students talked about the need for schools to make clear statements about expectations and have rigorous monitoring procedures.

Subjects too difficult or not stimulating Some students indicated that they stayed away from school or from particular classes because they were finding the work difficult or boring, and felt unable to approach the teachers for support or assistance. This was a common reason given by students who were partial truants, and was often a sign of specific learning difficulties.

School pressure and unreasonable deadlines Senior students cited this as a frequent reason for taking days off. They were concerned that teachers did not seem to coordinate their assessment schedules with other teachers and workloads were at times unreasonable and unrealistic.

Difficulties completing homework Some students said that they were absent from school sometimes when they were unable to complete their homework. Reasons given included lack of access to the Internet, lack of resources, family distractions and poor understanding of work requirements.

Relationship problems with teachers Some students said that they avoided particular classes because of a failure to relate to or communicate with particular teachers.

The fear of returning to school after absence Students talked about the difficulties of returning to school after extended periods of absence. They related feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work that they needed to catch up on and talked about difficulties in settling back into peer relationships. Some students talked about the fear of the negative attitudes and lack of support of teachers upon their return.

Sleep difficulties Many students reported that they missed school because they were too tired to come to school as a result of poor sleep patterns due to either lack of routine or anxiety related issues. Many admitted that they stayed up late on the Internet either gaming or chatting with friends.

Distance and/or public transport difficulties Many students reported having to travel long distances to attend school. They stated that when public transport was missed it was easier to stay at home. Distance and reliance on public transport were common reasons given for lateness.

Emotional difficulties This was recognised as the reason for some more serious extended absences. The triggers spanned a full range of adolescent mental health and family crisis and relationship issues.

Attendance meetings involving discussions between school staff, the school Participation Officer and parents/carers, identified the following family factors as affecting student attendance:

Transience Many families were from public housing estates or temporary accommodation and demonstrated high levels of mobility. This transience leads to students and families finding it difficult to resettle and at times failing to enrol in new schools.

Parent isolation Some parents talked about the practice of keeping the child home as a result of the social isolation of the family. In some cases this was to keep the adult company, whilst in others the child was kept home to perform adult duties such as interpreting and minding younger siblings. This was particularly prevalent in families recently arrived in this country.

Home organizational difficulties Some parents experienced challenges getting the household organised and the children ready for school. They also talked about having difficulty setting boundaries and establishing effective discipline with their children. Many reported that their children were staying up late at night, many either chatting on the Internet or playing computer games.

Family relationship challenges Parents who were experiencing marriage break ups or relationship problems stated that they found it more difficult to support their children's attendance at school.

Low parental value of education or differing cultural expectations Some parents demonstrated that they had little understanding of the value of formal education. This was often the result of their own experience of schooling or, in a few cases, the result of the parent not having attended school at all.

Extended family holidays Families with strong family ties in overseas countries articulated the need to periodically take their children back overseas for family reunion visits. They explained that it was not always possible to do this during holiday periods, especially in instances where a close relative was either sick or had died. Some parents took their children back for visits due to needing family support after marriage and relationship break ups.

Several cases of more chronic absence were identified in all Network Schools. These were students who repeatedly took large numbers of days off for unexplained reasons. A typical profile for these families was:

- Mother as sole parent
- Transient residential patterns
- History of poor school attendance
- Student with emotional or learning difficulties
- Low income
- Parent history of alcohol or substance abuse
- History of domestic violence
- Reluctance of parents to accept family or social support
- Parent dependant on child for social and/or physical support

Prior to the commencement of the project, all network schools had very high levels of '**unexplained**' absences. This was a result of students and parents not furnishing documentation or verbal confirmation of absence, and also indicated the need for schools to develop new procedures to support improved communication.

SECTION 4

WHAT IS AN ATTENDANCE - CLEVER SCHOOL? - A model based on the attendance improvement strategies of the Yarra Schools Network.

The overview of student absence levels, types and causal factors gained by the conduct of the situational analysis formed the basis of the development of both network and individual school strategy plans.

The strategies adopted by the Yarra Network schools in their journeys to becoming attendance-clever were not necessarily innovative or complex, but rather were grounded in the recognition of the need to implement a rigorous and sustainable school improvement process. The key to the success of the schools was recognition and understanding that this process demanded a strategic whole school and evidence-based approach to address broad issues of school improvement, student wellbeing and accountability.

In this section the attendance improvement strategies developed and implemented by the Network group and individual network schools will be explored in detail. These strategies are classified into seven key strategy areas, which together make up the model of an *Attendance - Clever School*. There is an audit tool to support the use of this model included in the Resource section of this report. When using this model it is important to recognise that all strategy areas need to be addressed simultaneously.

These strategies are:

Strategy 1- Clearly Stated Expectations

Strategy 2- Effective Use of Data

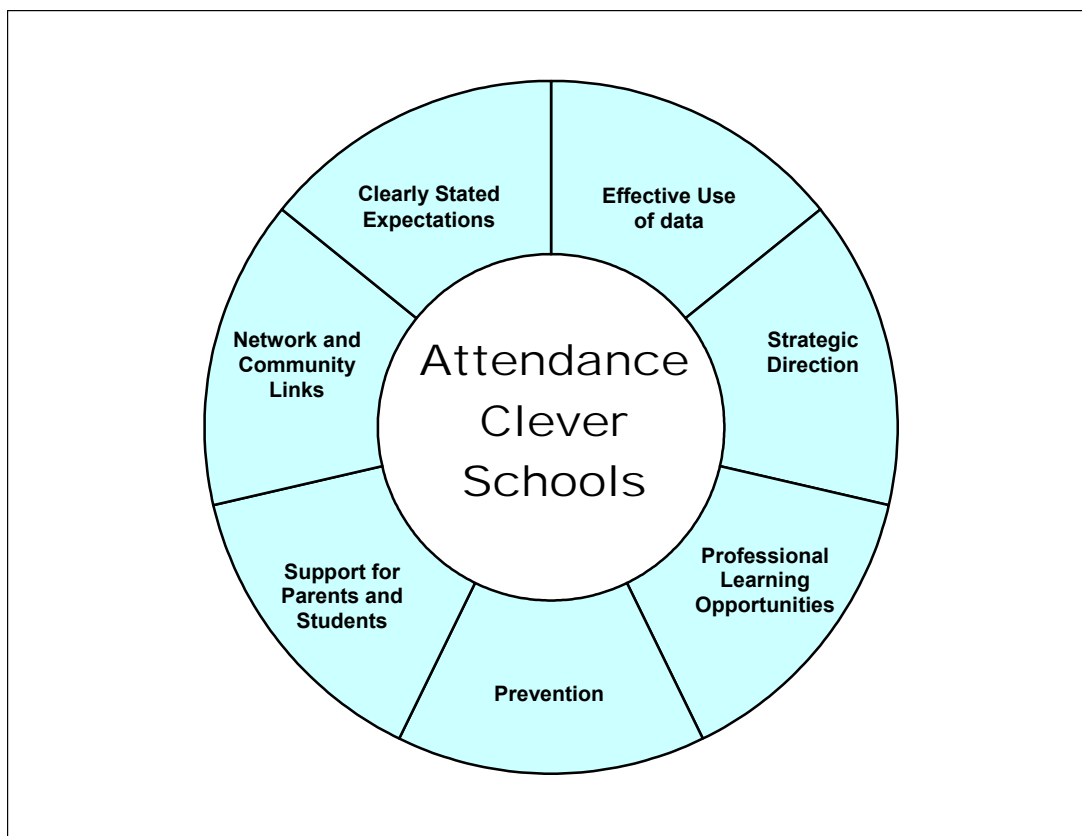
Strategy 3- Strategic Approach

Strategy 4- Professional Learning Opportunities

Strategy 5- Prevention

Strategy 6- Support for Students and Parents

Strategy 7- Network and Community Links



The Yarra Schools Network Model of Attendance-Clever schools

Clever Schools adopt the following strategies:

- 1. Clearly Stated Expectations**
- 2. Effective Use of data**
- 3. Strategic Direction**
- 4. Professional Learning Opportunities**
- 5. Prevention**
- 6. Support for Parents and Students**
- 7. Network and Community Links**

Strategy 1 - Clearly Stated Expectations

The making of clear statements of high expectations for student attendance by and for all members of the school community is a central component of the improvement process. Clear statements of expectations foster shared ownership and understanding and provide routine and predictability for members of the community. Such statements support the school in the discharge of duty of care and accountability requirements and can model the expectations of other environments such as the workplace.

Actions:

Development of transparent and workable policy and procedures documents including clear written statements of roles, responsibilities and procedures

Yarra Network schools recognized that although there had been various written and verbal statements made in the past about student attendance, schools did not have clear policy statements, which included clear statements about community beliefs and expectations, the value of education and the need for regular attendance. Feedback from teachers, students and parents asserted that existing policies and procedures documents were not clear and there was little understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various members of the community. It was also recognised that policy documents did not clearly outline daily operations.

The schools decided to produce revised policy and procedure documents adopting user-friendly formats for different audiences i.e. staff, student, parent, families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and to include statements of the following:

- The values and beliefs held by the community about the need for students to attend school regularly
- The government legislation supporting student attendance
- The roles and responsibilities of the various groups and people involved i.e. leadership, teachers, parents, and students
- Daily and other cyclical procedures for follow up with non-attending students including the use of letters, attendance meetings and attendance conferences with students and parents
- The support available for students who are not attending

Several Network schools recognised the need to highlight their policy on "Extended family Holidays". These schools developed clear procedures for parent notification to the school of their intention to take their child on holidays during school time. These schools also developed a shared proforma which parents were asked to complete and submit to the Principal. This procedure allowed the school to have dialogue with the parents about the possible

impact of the absence on the student's progress and also gave the chance for discussion of possible alternative learning activities for the student.

Consultative and collaborative approach used in policy development

In Yarra Network schools revised student attendance policy statements were developed and implemented using the following approaches:

- Close analysis of data to determine policy direction
- Research on policies developed in other schools
- Intensive PD with members of staff, most notably team leaders and year level coordinators
- Focus groups and surveys amongst student population
- Consultation with parent groups
- Consultation with staff groups and discussion at staff meetings
- Preparation and refinement of draft policy documents
- Endorsement of final policy documents by school community groups

Policies and procedures reviewed regularly

The schools of the Yarra Schools Network continually revised their policies and procedures as the project developed and further strategies were implemented and evaluated. All schools have made a commitment to formally revise policy documents in a three-year cycle.

Clear verbal statements made to teachers, parents and students about school and community attendance expectations

In Yarra Network schools verbal statements outlining and explaining attendance policies and procedures were made a focus at staff meetings, student assemblies and class meetings, as well as all conferences and meetings with parents including:

- School Tours
- Prep and year 7 orientation visits
- Parent Information sessions
- Parent/ teacher conferences
- Parent Association Meetings
- School Council Meetings

Interpreters were used at parent forums The Yarra Network schools used a common script at parent information sessions to ensure that members of the local community received a consistent message.

Regular and effective statements in school publications

In the Yarra Schools Network written statements are regularly made in all staff, student and parent publications and newsletters.

A series of common Newsletter articles was developed and used in the newsletters of Network schools. These made simple, clear statements about the need for regular attendance and gave consistent advice about the responsibilities of parents. Each school included such information in their newsletters on a regular basis.

A Yarra Schools Network brochure *Attendance and Your Child* was developed. This contained clear statements about current research around the value of schooling and the need for students to attend school on a regular basis. It outlined the current legislation and expectations and made generic statements about the role of parents in ensuring their child's attendance. It also provided some advice on what to do if having difficulty getting children to school. The brochure was distributed to every family in the Network and was also given to all new parents as they enrolled their children at school

Modelling of regular attendance and punctuality by all staff

Yarra Network schools recognise that it is important that all staff have high attendance expectations and model good attendance patterns including punctuality for all classes and meetings with students and parents.

Strategy 2 - Effective use of Data

The use of accurate attendance data is one of the most powerful tools in the student attendance improvement process. It supports an evidence-based approach to strategic direction and also leads to the early identification of students at risk of developing poor attendance patterns.

Actions:

Accurate and rigorous data gathering and recording procedures

Attendance rolls should be taken at least twice daily and preferably on a period-by-period basis in secondary settings. It is important that there are procedures in place to enable the recording of lateness and also the reasons and documentation supplied to explain absences.

In some Network schools data is entered onto CASES 21 each day. This enables closer management of the data and supports immediate identification and follow-up for absent students.

In Network schools data entry personnel were given additional on-site training in attendance data entry and management through work with the School participation Officer. As a result they are able to more quickly identify worrying patterns for groups or individual students.

Regular analysis of attendance data i.e. daily, weekly, monthly, six monthly, and annually

In the Yarra School Network the importance of daily checks on student attendance has been recognised. More detailed data analysis is carried out each fortnight using the following CASES 21 reports:

ST 21314 Absence Report Type by Whole School
ST 21316 Student Absence Summary by Home Group

Checks are made on the number of absences and the absence patterns of individual students, as well as the reasons given for student absence.

At the end of each month a further analysis of unexplained absences is made using the CASES 21 report SXAB21330 Unapproved absence Summary (for whole school).

A thorough analysis of data is made every six months. Excel graphs are used to assist the process.

The following CASES21 reports are used

ST 21314 Absence Report Type by Whole School
SXAB21330 Unapproved absence Summary (for whole school)
ST 21316 Student Absence Summary by Home Group
ST 21317 Student Absence Summary by Year Level
ST 21318 Half Day attendance under 80 per cent
ST 21314 Absence Report Type for Whole School- Extended Family holiday.

The following factors are considered:

- The average number of absences per student in each year level compared with same year level and state mean of year before
- The overall average number of days per student P-6 or 7-12 compared with same level and state mean of year before
- The absence rate for girls compared with boys
- The number of days absence per student for particular reasons e.g. extended family holiday; parent choice etc
- The number of unexplained absences per student at each level and for the school as a whole

Accurate and correct use of CASES 21 codes or equivalent

Absence codes are an essential tool in school based data analysis. They enable accurate tracking of individual students and also provide detailed information for improvement strategies. For absence code systems to be effective it is necessary to have rigorous procedures in place to gain information from parents and students about the reasons for absences. Network schools have minimised the number of codes used and these codes are applied in a consistent manner. Particular attention has also been paid to

the correct use of codes in instances where the absence should not be recorded as an absence e.g. student free days, Prep transition arrangements and senior exam periods.

The same codes are utilised in all Yarra Network schools to allow more uniform approaches and more accurate Network data.

Regular 'clean ups' of data

Maintenance of stored attendance data is important to ensure the generation of accurate information. The following should be checked on a regular basis:

- All attendance data is entered on the system
- All exits and transfers are entered on the system from the student's last day of attendance
- All extended family are holidays entered accurately
- Correct CASES 21 codes or equivalent are used
- 'Unexplained' absences are fully updated
- All notes and other authorisation documents are filed
- Letters have been sent for all unexplained absences

Effective student transfer and enrolment procedures

It is essential that there is prompt follow up when students either enrol or transfer. Transfers that are not followed up could enable students to leave the school system undetected. Schools should immediately contact the student's school of origin upon their enrolment. Transfer and exits should be entered on CASES 21 from the last date that the student attended school.

The use of accurate data to regularly inform students and parents

It is important that parents and students have access to individual attendance data. All Network schools include summary attendance data on student progress reports. Some schools make attendance summary documents such as CASES 21 summary reports available to parents and students at the time of any conferences or meetings where the student's attendance is a focus. Students often enjoy using attendance data in the formation of personal goals and targets. A particularly effective approach is to use absence data to demonstrate to the student and parent the number of hours and days of lost learning opportunities due to lateness or absence.

Strategy 3 - Strategic Direction

It is essential that attendance improvement processes are strategic in approach and are integral to the overall strategic direction of the school. Each school should have an Attendance Improvement Team to oversee and monitor attendance improvement strategies. Opportunity should be built into the improvement process for analysis and reflection on the current situation, identified challenges, appropriate action and progressive successes.

In the experience of the Yarra Schools Network, it was found that it was important to keep the planning for the attendance improvement process as simple and as realistic as possible. Recognition was made of competing school priorities and as a result improvement teams were kept small and workable. Meetings were purposeful and well prepared and all timelines and actions were realistic and clear.

Actions:

Attendance made a key priority in school strategic and annual implementation plans

Student attendance should be recognised as a key area in school improvement strategies. Planning should include the use of varied data gathering techniques and should involve active prioritisation, the recognition of challenges, identification of the target group, and details of improvement team operational arrangements. Strategic plans should include articulation of:

- The link between attendance strategies and overall school vision and strategic direction
- Clear and achievable goals and outcomes
- Realistic and detailed timelines
- The identification of measurable outcomes
- The improvement team and agreement on who is responsible for individual actions

The use of varied data gathering techniques

Yarra Network schools used a wide variety of sources for data to feed the evidence base of the attendance improvement process. These included:

- Current attendance data
- Feedback from principal, teacher, student and parent focus group sessions
- Feedback from student and parent attendance meetings and counselling situations
- Teacher, student and parent opinion surveys
- Curriculum and wellbeing audits
- Attendance improvement audits developed by the School Participation Project
- Anecdotal evidence

Strategy 4 - Professional Learning Opportunities

Professional Learning activities are an essential component of the improvement process as they serve to not only raise staff awareness of issues surrounding student attendance and therefore gain shared ownership of improvement strategies, but also offer both formal and informal opportunities for the further skilling of staff in areas such as the support of individual parents and students. It is important that all staff take responsibility for student attendance and that they understand the relationship between student attendance and student engagement.

Actions:

Regular discussions and facilitated sessions in staff forums on attendance and engagement issues

The experience in the Yarra Network schools was that it was not necessary to allocate large amounts of formal professional learning time for activities focused on student attendance. The schools tended to adopt the 'drip' system, that is, many small activities done more often. Sessions were kept simple and were usually part of normal staff meeting agendas. Activities were based around discussion and training about the following:

- The issue of student absenteeism in schools
- Why would we as a school community want to improve attendance?
- A whole school approach to attendance
- What strategies would best address this issue in our community?
- The development and details of a strategic approach to the attendance issue
- Attendance improvement strategies in the context of the school's overall strategic direction and planning.
- The different types and causal factors of student absence
- What other groups in our community can support our work?
- Approaches in supporting parents and students including supporting students in their return to school

Leadership mentoring and modelling with staff

This is a very effective method of empowering teaching and school service staff in their work with students and parents. Leaders/mentors can achieve this through informal conversations with staff as well as in more structured situations such as in student welfare support meetings where teachers can be encouraged to talk over their approaches with their class group and individual students and parents. Another method can be the modelling of approaches in meetings with students and parents. In this situation, the mentor works with the staff member establishing possible approaches before the meeting, models these during the meeting, and then consolidates with a debriefing

session at the end. In the Yarra Network the School Participation Officer and leadership staff have used this as a key strategy.

Discussion of attendance improvement strategies in performance review meetings

Performance review discussions on staff roles, responsibilities and achievements can provide another effective mentoring situation. This also reinforces shared ownership of strategies and supports discussion of accountability issues. Several Yarra Network schools now have student attendance as a key focus in staff performance reviews.

Sharing knowledge and understandings with Network schools and community agencies

Participating in forums and joint programs with other schools and community agencies is an effective way of enhancing professional learning as it fosters shared knowledge, understandings and skills. This has been a central focus of the School Participation Project.

Opportunities to work with community agencies in secondary consultation situations and in the implementation of joint programs are a particularly valuable. In the Yarra Network schools this has been achieved through multidisciplinary welfare committees, joint programs and school membership of the Yarra Agencies and Schools Together Forum.

Participation in external professional learning opportunities

All DE&T Regions now offer intensive professional learning opportunities to schools through the *It's not Okay to be Away* initiative. School staff participation in this type of activity is an important ingredient in the improvement process as benefit can be gained by access to the many good practice models that now exist. The old adage of not needing to reinvent the wheel applies here. The schools of the Yarra Network have maintained a close relationship with the Northern Metropolitan Region *Improving Student Attendance* program and have been able to enhance and consolidate their knowledge and skills through involvement in the program both as participants and presenters.

Strategy 5 – Prevention

It is widely recognised that student absence is merely a symptom of something that is not quite right in their life of the student, either in their personal life or in their life at school. Therefore preventative measures adopted by schools need to be holistic and address the broad range of factors which affect the student's intellectual and social and emotional learning and development.

Actions:

Effective monitoring of student attendance and early identification of students at risk of non-attendance

Effective monitoring has been recognised by all Network schools as one of the most powerful tools in improving student attendance. The key to this approach is close tracking of individual and group student attendance so that worrying attendance habits are identified before they have a chance to develop. Close monitoring also sends a very clear message to students and parents.

As outlined earlier in this report, attendance data should be looked at regularly to monitor the attendance patterns of both individual students and groups of students. It is important that schools have an identified target group and procedures for the tracking of individual students.

Yarra Network schools have emphasised the need for every student absence to be explained. Phone calls and follow-up letters are used regularly and students are encouraged to take responsibility for bringing absence notes. Several Network schools have absence note proformas translated into community languages to facilitate this process.

The introduction of period-by-period electronic monitoring procedures in the secondary schools has supported routines where individual patterns are easily recognised and quickly acted upon. These systems enable parents to be contacted electronically either by text message or Internet should the child be absent. This close monitoring helps to reinforce the message that all students need to be at school at all time during the school day and assists the schools in discharging their duty of care.

The introduction of these systems has led to a noticeable decrease in student absence and the generation of more accurate attendance data.

It should be noted that the implementation of these systems has not necessarily been straightforward and requires the commitment and ownership of all staff members. Two Network schools have needed to change to alternative software packages due to poor compatibility with other school databases. It should also be noted that staff need to be given intensive training in the use of these systems and should be encouraged to recognise and own the benefits of the innovation.

Implementation of transition support programs

Effective and supportive transition arrangements offer students the best chance at adjustment to new learning environments. If a student is feeling safe and supported in the new environment they are less likely to miss days at school.

The Yarra Schools Network schools have paid attention to both the Prep transition phase as well as the transition of year six students to secondary settings.

Prep programs include intensive orientation programs commencing months before the commencement of school. One Network school offers whole pre school groups the chance to visit the school for an afternoon in addition to a series of three official orientation visits. Parents accompany their children on all these visits and enjoy several formal information sessions whilst their children acclimatise in the classroom. Discussion on the importance of regular attendance is a focus at these sessions. Parents are also invited to further social activities as well as a formal information session at the commencement of the school year.

All Network schools offer flexible arrangements for prep student school attendance in the first four weeks of the school year.

The Yarra Schools Network has developed and implemented a formal transition program for all year 6 students in Network schools. This involves a two-day program held in one of the Network schools. The first day of the program provides comfortable social situations for students to meet other students going to the same destination school. This takes place in the week before the official orientation activity. The second day, held after the orientation visits, gives students opportunities to explore transition issues and gain a more detailed understanding of the secondary school environment. This is achieved through small group discussion with other students led by experienced personnel from secondary schools working with the year 6 teachers.

An informal program has also been developed to further support students. Arrangements are made between Network schools for additional orientation visits and activities for parents and students and for the exchange of basic support information about individual students.

Well-developed student wellbeing programs and student mentoring structures

There is an irrefutable link between student learning, social functioning and wellbeing. Yarra Network schools recognise that in addressing attendance issues, schools need to develop realistic and relevant student wellbeing policies and programs. Wellbeing policies need to be proactive and not random reactions to crisis situations. They should involve parents and the wider community in a collaborative approach to establish shared ownership and responsibility.

It has also been recognised that wellbeing programs need to be relevant and comprehensive and should be an ongoing core component of the curriculum. Student wellbeing programs cannot be effective unless they operate within a school culture that demonstrates genuine concern for all members of its

community. Core programs need to be complemented by appropriate intervention programs. Structures and practices need to foster an environment where students have a sense of self worth and connectedness to the community.

All Yarra Network schools have been reviewing their student wellbeing policies, programs and practices. The secondary schools in particular have been developing their daily staff/student mentoring approaches. These schools recognise that students who experience genuine connection to the school community are usually more resilient when they encounter problems in their lives. All schools have increased the amount of time that mentoring staff meet with students each day and have introduced a structured wellbeing program, which provides a focus for these sessions. Staff have been given additional professional training to support them in this work. Mentoring groups have been reduced in size and attempts have been made to enable staff mentors to continue their work with particular students over consecutive years.

The wellbeing programs of the Yarra Network schools have been informed by current research including information on:

- Restorative Practices
- The National Safe Schools Framework
- Mindmatters
- Beyondblue
- *It's not OK to be Away*
- Health Promoting Schools Framework

Creation of safe and supportive school environments

A common causal factor of student absence is students not feeling safe and secure within the school environment. Social problems with peers and actual bullying incidents can contribute to individual students not wanting to come to school. Schools need to have preventative programs in place and also need to ensure that all incidents are dealt with promptly and effectively.

All Network schools are currently using the National Safe Schools Framework to review their anti-bullying and harassment, resilience and social skill policies and programs.

Raising student awareness of the importance of regular attendance

There should be regular discussion in the classroom at all levels about the importance of regular attendance. This has become a focus in the classrooms and mentoring situations in all Network schools.

In one school the year six teacher held positive discussions in her class at least once per week about the need to be at school as much as possible. She encouraged the students to verbalise the benefits of good attendance as well

as what might be the immediate and future challenges caused by poor attendance. Discussions covered such topics as friendship problems, social isolation, feelings of disorganization and difficulty keeping up. They also looked to the future and discussed the links between good school attendance and success in secondary school and in adult life. The students developed role-play activities and posters as a response to the discussions

Students were encouraged to take responsibility for bringing absence notes and monitoring of this was built into the daily routine of the class using a checklist that the child could delete their name from once the note was produced. Students set attendance goals for themselves and were given regular access to their record of absence days.

The class also prepared a presentation for the school assembly in order to share their discussions and educate the younger students about the benefits of regular attendance.

This particular class achieved annual absence levels as low as four days per student and few of these absences were left unexplained.

Network schools have also attempted to raise student awareness of attendance issues using approaches such as:

- Supporting discussion of attendance issues in student representative groups
- Inclusion of students in focus discussions on attendance
- Encouraging students to develop attendance promoting brochures and posters for use within the school

Network primary schools have introduced student reward and incentive schemes. Attendance certificates are regularly given to students with high attendance rates. This is done at school assemblies and allows opportunities for celebration and awareness raising. This has proven to be a very effective strategy with schools identifying an increase in the number of students who have one hundred percent attendance.

Creation of learning environments, which are supportive, purposeful and productive and the implementation of programs and practice which enable success for all students and which cater for individual learning styles

There is an obvious link between students feeling good about their learning and regular attendance. School environments need to be supportive and actively engage students in their learning, especially learning suited to their preferred learning styles.

In the Yarra Schools Network the nine schools have been actively working together in the current Innovations and Excellence Program, which has been working collaboratively with the School Participation Project. The I&E program has also resulted in the formation of several Network working groups, which have worked with a Network Educator in looking at school improvement strategies for the development of more effective teaching and learning in

Network schools. Whole network Professional learning activities have been organised. Focus areas for the I&E program have included:

- Supporting students to assume higher levels of responsibility for their learning
- Supporting teachers to incorporate a range of inclusive strategies and practices in their teaching
- Valuing critical and creative thinking in teaching and learning
- Exploration of social learning approaches
- Innovative assessment strategies
- Authentic learning beyond the classroom
- Individual student learning plans
- The Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT)
- The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)
- The education of boys

Provision of out of school programs including breakfast, lunch, homework and walking bus clubs

These programs not only provide daily support for students and parents, but are preventative in approach as they make it easier for students to come to school each day and to also get to school on time. They provide support to both complement and supplement home and family routines.

Several Network schools have well established breakfast programs where students are served a healthy breakfast at the school before the commencement of the school day. One secondary school has the canteen available to students before school. These programs are sponsored by organisations such as the Red Cross and encourage students to be organised and on time for school. This approach also minimises potential organisational difficulties back in the student's homes.

The secondary alternative settings have all developed programs where students and teachers together prepare hot lunches each day. This once again encourages students to come to school each day.

Several Network primary schools have introduced homework clubs once again supported by the Red Cross. Students are tutored by university student tutors and are able to complete their homework in an organised and supportive environment. One of the Network schools introduced this program as a result of recognising the link between students having homework difficulties and increased levels of avoidance of school leading to student absence.

The same school also recognised that some parents were regularly keeping their children home on occasions when they were unable to personally bring them to school. The parents demonstrated reluctance to allow their children to walk to school by themselves due to a potentially dangerous local environment. As a result, the school is now participating in the City of Yarra Walking Bus Program. This program links the local high-rise public housing

with the school and promotes increased attendance and improved punctuality, whilst at the same time encouraging both student independence and connectedness.

Provision of careers and pathways programs and counselling

These approaches recognise the link between poor student motivation and student disengagement. They also recognise the importance of all students understanding the value of their schooling through a focus on their goals and aspirations for the future.

All Network secondary settings have well established careers and pathways programs and all students are given access to counselling support.

In a network primary school concerns were raised by the year six team about the possible disengagement of their students in early secondary school due to a discernable lack of family encouragement and student motivation about future careers and pathways. As a result, a classroom program was initiated where students are encouraged to set goals for the future and then actively research possible education and career pathways. The program included an activity which invited adults from diverse career backgrounds to visit and discuss their pathways and decision-making with groups of students.

Parents actively involved in the life of the school

Network schools have recognised the value and benefit of having parents actively engaged and connected within the school community. This not only allows parents to work cooperatively and collaboratively in supporting their child's learning, but also provides them valuable connections to other parents as well as to the wider community. The primary settings offer many programs involving parents. These include active involvement in classroom programs as well as opportunities for parents to meet each other socially. One of the schools has offered parenting assistance through formal parenting classes facilitated by the school nurse. These sessions have supported some otherwise isolated parents to operate more effectively with their children in the development of enhanced relationships and the establishment of more organised family routines. This approach ultimately supported parents getting their children to school as parents were more empowered within their families

Another Network school encourages parents to come into the school and the classroom at any time. Weekly parent meetings are held in the staffroom and any suggestions, issues or concerns are given immediate attention.

The secondary settings have many parent issue-based evening activities, which provide parents with information and skills to support them in raising their adolescent children. These sessions also provide a valuable point of connection between the parents and the school and wider community.

Modification of the timetable and learning program to maximize student attendance

Simple modifications to the learning program and timetable can sometimes provide the flexibility of time needed for students and parents to address other concerns. A Network secondary school modified the weekly timetable so that the students finished early on one day per week. This time enabled students and parents to make any medical or other appointments during this time and as result there was much less partial absence on the other school days. The early finish day was used by the staff for professional learning activities and planning sessions.

A Network primary school, concerned by the number of students arriving late each day, decided to rearrange the timetable and offer an exercise and sport session at the beginning of the day. This has motivated the students and has resulted in fewer latecomers.

Strategy 6 – Support for Students and Parents

Actions:

Use of inclusive practices including translation of materials and the use of interpreters

This has been a particularly important approach in the Yarra Schools Network due to the large number of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Schools have been careful to arrange interpreters for all parent information sessions and attendance meetings. They have also utilised the services of multicultural aides and phone interpreting services when making phone calls to parents. One secondary school has provided parents with simple scripts to use when calling the school to inform of their child's absence. Schools have also had all brochures, newsletters and letters translated into the languages spoken within the school community

Immediate and apparent follow-up to individual student absence

Network schools have recognised the benefit of having systems in place to enable prompt follow-up to student absence. Introducing a system where daily contact is made with the families of all absent students has proven to be very effective in some Network schools. This is achieved by asking parents to contact the school each day that their child is absent. Schools have systems in place for contact with the parent if they fail to do so. This allows the school the opportunity to have a dialogue with parents around the absence and to offer any necessary support. It has been recognised that this contact needs to be made by skilled personnel who are able to be sensitive to differing situations. It has also been recognised that once introduced this approach

needs to be operated consistently to ensure both credibility and accountability.

Development of a knowledge and understanding of the different types and causal factors of individual student's absence and the response and support required

Yarra Network schools have recognised that every student absence is different and therefore requires a particular response. Different situations need different strategies. Close communication with the parent and the student is essential to allow the school to ascertain the full picture and therefore respond in the appropriate manner. The Yarra Schools Network working definitions of the types of student absence have given schools a framework for more informed decisions about appropriate approaches.

Establishment of appropriate forums for multi- disciplinary discussion and support of individual students and their families

One of the most effective ways of supporting students and parents is to have attendance addressed within the context of student support meetings. In one Network primary school the Student Support Group has a multi-disciplinary membership and operates using a secondary consultation model. The core group includes the school's Assistant Principal who coordinates the group, an educational psychologist, a school nurse, a paediatrician, a welfare officer and a speech pathologist. The School Participation Officer was a member of this group

The group meets on a fortnightly basis. Critical to the effectiveness of the group is the attendance of a referred student's classroom teacher. Teachers refer students to the Assistant Principal who agendas the case load for each meeting. At the initial consultation the teacher outlines their concern and the group propose a course of action. Student attendance is a common focus. Typically action leads to assessments, parent meetings, referral to outside agencies, and implementation of school protocols or strategies for the classroom teacher. At subsequent meetings progress is reported and action tailored to best address the need. In some cases the action can lead to application to the Program for Students with Disabilities.

Meetings are minuted then distributed to all teachers so there is a shared understanding of student needs. Confidentiality is essential.

This approach has many benefits including:

- Specific identification of student needs with a 'whole child focus'
- Systematic planning of strategies to improve well-being and learning
- Increased support for teachers to assist them plan and implement programs that meet student needs
- Shared understanding of student needs and how best to meet them
- Stream-lining and maximising services available to support students

- Increased understanding for parents/care givers of their child's needs with affordable support provided in their local environment
- Enhanced processes to support students with K-P and Yr 6-7 transition
- The group provides a point of reference for outside agencies.

Organization of attendance meetings with students and parents

Attendance meetings or conferences can be a powerful means of supporting individual students. In Yarra schools they are organized with students with above average absence rates. These meetings should ideally involve students, parents, the classroom teacher, a member of the school administration and the School Participation Officer. The purpose of these meetings is to review strategies initiated to support the student's attendance and to examine why non-attendance has not been resolved. The meetings should establish a shared understanding of accountability and strategies for improving the attendance of the student. Meetings should be supportive rather than disciplinary and should focus on solutions. It is important that there is transparent and immediate action on any problems identified by the parents and student.

An effective strategy is to involve the student in goal setting and the development of an individual attendance improvement plan. The purpose of such a plan is to develop and monitor an appropriate program of assistance and support for the student. The plan should include details of agreed expectations, contact personnel, available support and other relevant information.

Network schools have attempted to be flexible in the organisation of these meetings and have accommodated home or 'off-site' meetings when necessary or when this approach would make it more comfortable for the participants.

Schools have also attempted to apply the following when working with students and parents in discussion of attendance issues:

- Sensitivity
- Non-judgement
- Flexibility
- Inclusion
- Empowerment
- Transparency
- Consistency
- Fairness

Support for chronic absence cases

There have been several cases of more severe absence in Network schools. In cases where the absence was due to "parent withdrawal" a wide variety of further strategies have been utilised including:

- Home visits. These were only used as a strategy when there had been a breakdown in communication methods between the school and the parent

or when invited to do so by the parent. School personnel did not attempt to enter the home other than to make contact so that further contact could be arranged.

- Referral of the parent to outside agencies for family or social support. This included several welfare agencies for cultural groups.
- Referral of the parent to NMR Senior Education Officer. The SEO made written contact with the parent to reinforce the message already given by the school. This method was only used in a small number of cases where it was recognised that it would be effective.
- Referral of the parent to the Department of Human Services. This was only done when all other attempts at rectifying the situation had failed and referrals were only accepted by the DHS in a few extreme cases.

In cases where the absence was due to “school refusal” the following support strategies were utilised:

- Home visits. These were made in arrangement with the parent and allowed the opportunity for restoring connection with the student. In some cases these gave school personnel the opportunity to model approaches to the parent.
- Regular contact with the parents
- Meeting with the student in more friendly circumstances such as in coffee shops or at school out of normal hours.
- Referral of the student to outside agencies for emotional support. These agencies included Austin CAMHS and Centacare Family Services School Refusal Clinic. These referrals involved the schools in regular meetings with agency personnel.
- Intensive support for the student on their return to school including the use formal plans (See next section)
- Provision of a flexible program for the student
- Provision of counselling support at the school
- Provision of a ‘safe’ place for the student at the school
- Extra support such as ‘travel training’
- Referral of the student to the Distance Education Centre. This was done as an interim measure in only a few cases where all other strategies had failed.

Positive support and follow-up with students on their return to school

It is important that students have positive experiences when they return to school after being absent. Yarra Network schools have recognised and implemented the following approaches:

- Arrangements are made to meet the student each morning in a non-threatening and private place to talk about what the day may look like. The student is encouraged to visualise various aspects of the day.
- The use of welcoming and supportive verbal and non-verbal language
- Modification of the type, amount and deadlines of catch up work required. Students and teachers to have conferences to negotiate this.
- Making sure that students are clear about all arrangements and expectations through the use of a **return to school plan**. The plan developed collaboratively with the student, preferably with the parent present. All instructions are also given verbally and the student is asked to verbalise their understanding of the content in order to check for understanding.
- Ensuring that any fears or concerns have been addressed and demonstrating this clearly to the student
- Organisation of quick catch-ups with an adult mentor at different periods during the day
- Discussion of possible plans of action about who to look for and where to go should they be feeling uneasy at any stage
- Communication of all arrangements to any staff involved with the student and ensuring that all staff are using common approaches
- Allowing the student peripheral participation in class until they are feeling settled
- Connecting with the student at least once each day
- Organisation of a review meeting at the end of the first week to allow review of the plan, positive feedback, and identification of any emerging difficulties
- Immediate follow up if the student is absent or misses any classes
- Recognition that follow-up and support needs to be long term and consistently applied

- Respect for confidentiality of the student's situation. Information to other staff is given on a "need to know" basis only and concentrates on the re-engagement processes for the student. Staff are careful not to talk about the student's absence in front of the class group or any other student

Return to school plans are made in collaboration with the parents and students and include:

- Statements about attendance expectations and procedures
- The student's individual goals for attendance and re-engagement
- The student's timetable
- All bell times
- The time the student aims to arrive at school and also what time they aim to get up and go to bed in order to achieve this
- Organizational routines at home
- Work to be completed and the due dates
- A homework schedule
- The names of staff mentors and where they are located
- The time, date, and location of any subsequent meetings

Strategy 7 – Network and Community links

Pivotal to the attendance improvement process is the development of strong links with other schools and with community organisations and agencies. Partnerships between schools and community groups enhance outcomes for students through shared responsibility and collaborative approaches to program strategies. The school is one of the only points of connection with the wider community for many students and their families.

Actions:

Collaborative joint programs and casework between Network schools and community agencies

Acknowledgement must be made of the contribution to the success of the School Participation Project by community agencies, in particular the School Focused Youth Service, the *Yarra Agencies and Schools Together* group, Yarra Youth Services, Austin CAMHS, and Yarra Family Support Services. They have enthusiastically initiated and participated in joint programs and

have actively supported schools in secondary consultation and referrals of individual parents and students. Members of Yarra Network schools have been active members of local community forums and consultative forums.

Developing a knowledge and understanding of the key stakeholders in attendance improvement programs in schools

Yarra Network schools identified that their allies in addressing issues of student attendance included:

Parents	Mental Health units
Students	Community centres
Classroom teachers	Youth workers
Student mentors	Local Government
Wellbeing /welfare staff	Department of Education
Principals	Community interest groups
School Participation officer	Church groups
Administrative personnel	Local businesses
Year Level Coordinators	The Department of Human Services
Curriculum teams	Health Providers
Parent groups	Federal and State governments
Guidance Officers	The media
External family support agencies	The “ corporate “ world
School Council	Tertiary institutions
Student Representative Body	
Local community agencies/services	

Membership of school network groups

The School Participation Project provides a model of how a network of schools can benefit from initiating a joint project to address issues of student attendance. Full details of the Network model are outlined in section 5 of this report.

Regular communication with the DE&T regional office

The Northern Metropolitan Regional Office has played an integral role in the School Participation Project. The Senior Education Officer has been a member of the Steering Group and has offered ongoing support in some difficult absence cases. The regular exchange of ideas between the Project and the attendance programs and initiatives of the Regional Office have been of mutual benefit.

SECTION 5

WHAT IS AN ATTENDANCE CLEVER NETWORK? - A model based on the work of the Yarra Schools Network School Participation Project.

The development and implementation of the School Participation Project has led to enhanced and newly developed relationships between the nine network schools. Not only have individual schools benefited from the implementation of Attendance–Clever School improvement process, but also the Network as a whole has united in the articulation of shared values and vision, and in the implementation of joint strategies. As a result the Yarra Schools Network has transformed into an active and effective community, an ***Attendance-Clever Network***.

The focus of the attendance work of the Network was the formation and operation of the Network working groups. The Project Steering Group, the Attendance Working Group, the Student Wellbeing Group, the Transitions Group and The Bursars and Business Managers Group were all resourced and supported by the School Participation Officer and provided the stage and back drop for the development of the following relationships between the Network schools:

Coalition: formation of a strategic partnership to support a joint project.

This is evidenced by:

The schools of the Yarra Schools Network, led by a group of very strong leaders with a history of authentic collegiality, recognised the value of a group of schools combining their complementary capacities to work strategically towards desired outcomes. Together they were able to articulate **shared values** and vision of a community approach to improving student attendance, and recognised a perceived need to implement a joint project. As a result the School Participation Project was initiated and agreement on clear goals, desired outcomes, and the strategies needed to achieve these goals and outcomes, was established.

Coordination: managed and organised use of shared resources and experiences.

This is evidenced by:

The Network schools led by the Principals Steering Group managed the employment of the Project Officer to oversee and coordinate all aspects of the project. This resulted in the subsequent formation of several working groups to focus on the major strategic direction of the project. This phase involved clear definition of roles and responsibilities of the working groups and of the Officer including a cooperative service delivery model for the project officer resource. Management strategies implemented included the establishment of a central project office and the appointment of a coordinating school to

manage the project funds and to facilitate human resource functions for the employment of the Project Officer. It was recognised that maximum benefit could be gained for all schools through the **sharing of resources, procedures and approaches** as demonstrated by the implementation of a strategic plan.

Commitment: assurance made by each of the member schools that they will participate in and contribute to the joint project.

This is evidenced by:

The School Participation Project enjoyed high levels of ownership and commitment from the leaders and key staff of all the Network schools. Each school had designated representation on all project working groups and there was full and regular attendance at meetings. This involvement required individual school support of staff time release when necessary. Each school fully recognised and demonstrated ownership of the project strategic plan.

Communication: reporting and sharing of ideas, knowledge and learnings.

This is evidenced by:

Regular, well-structured and purposeful meetings formed a crucial part of the scaffolding for the project work. Priority time was given in these meetings for the **sharing of ideas, knowledge and learnings** and meetings were held on a rotational basis between all the school settings. Each group prepared detailed and well circulated agendas and minutes and there was regular email and telephone contact made between staff in all schools. Staff visits to other Network schools were commonplace. Pivotal to the effective communication between all groups and all personnel involved in the project was the preparation of detailed monthly reports by the School Participation Officer. The work was very heavily profiled beyond the Network by regular detailed input to the Department of Education and Training and community groups and agencies.

Cooperation: mutual assistance and teamwork between the network schools.

This is evidenced by:

Teamwork between the schools was established through the cooperative use of the School Participation Officer resource and the establishment of well functioning working groups. The establishment of **shared programs** and initiatives such as student transition programs **shared professional learning** activities and the initiation of **shared parent and student casework** allowed genuine teamwork to be of mutual benefit to schools. Schools further assisted each other through the **sharing of facilities and resources**.

Collaboration: enhancement of the capacities of partner schools for mutual benefit and shared purpose.

This is evidenced by:

All schools were actively involved in the planning and setting of priorities for the project. This resulted in agreement on shared approaches and the development of shared resources and tools. A major point of collaboration was the development of the Network Attendance Protocol, which articulated **shared policies** and procedures. All schools worked actively together in all aspects of project decision-making.

Complementary capacity: recognition that the similarities and differences between the participating schools can be utilised to improve outcomes for all schools.

This is evidenced by:

The distinct nature of each of the network schools was recognised and celebrated. Network schools adopted the title and identity of *The Yarra Schools Network*. There was an acceptance at all levels that individual schools had differing capacities for improvement and there was also recognition and endorsement of some schools requiring more project support than others. Network schools regularly and enthusiastically supported events and achievements in the other schools and recognised the responsibility and benefit of allocation of some project time to inform the wider community.

Critical reflection: use of a cyclical action research approach enabled by inbuilt processes and structures.

This is evidenced by:

The Steering Group recognised the need for the engagement of an external evaluation team from the initial planning phase through to the completion of the project report. They also recognised the benefit of consultation through the engagement of a critical friend. The action research and evidence based approach adopted ensured regular reflection, analysis of data and discussion of key learnings. The working groups paid special attention to the analysis of annual network data and this informed the implementation of the project strategic plan for the following twelve-month period. The project continually kept abreast of new directions and learnings through the maintenance of regular contact with similar projects and other good practice models.

Celebration: recognition and commemoration of collective and individual successes.

This is evidenced by:

All project meetings had a focus on acknowledgements and the reporting and celebration of good news. This approach was supported by regular reporting of all project initiatives to staff forums and in newsletters in each school. There was regular communication and affirmation of the recognition received by the Network and individual schools for the good practice adopted in the project. Publicity about the successes of the project was also gained through major press and television coverage as well as the profiling of the project to the wider community.



The Nine Cs in the Attendance-Clever Network

Coalition: formation of a strategic partnership between all the schools to support the joint project.

Coordination: managed and organised use of shared resources and experiences.

Commitment: assurance made by each of the member schools that they will participate in, and contribute to the joint project.

Communication: reporting and sharing of ideas, knowledge and learnings.

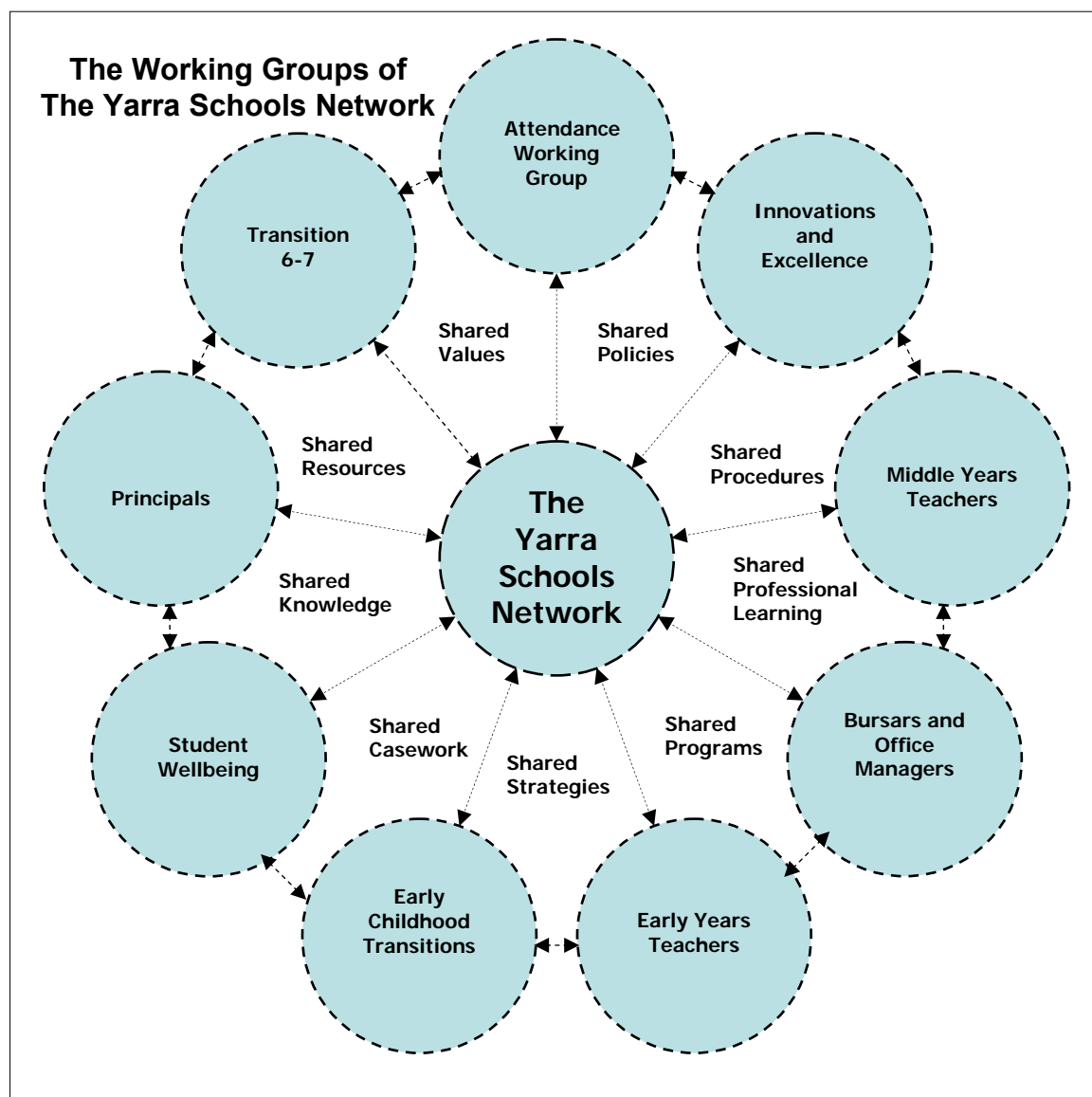
Cooperation: mutual assistance and teamwork between the network schools.

Collaboration: capacities of the partner schools are enhanced for mutual benefit and shared purpose.

Complementary capacity: recognition that the similarities and differences between the participating schools can be utilised to improve outcomes for all schools.

Critical reflection: a cyclical action research approach enabled by inbuilt structures and processes

Celebration: recognition and commemoration of collective and individual successes.



The Working Groups of the Yarra Schools Network

- Attendance Working Group
- Innovations and Excellence
- Middle Years Teachers
- Bursars and Office Managers
- Early Years Teachers
- Early Childhood Transitions
- Student Wellbeing
- Principals
- Transition 6-7

SECTION 6

HOW HAS THE YARRA SCHOOLS NETWORK AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY BENEFITED FROM AND VIEWED THE SCHOOL PARTICIPATION PROJECT?

There have been many positive identifiable outcomes from the work of the School Participation Project. These include:

- An improvement in attendance rates in all network schools and in the aggregate Network student absence data.
- Parent and community education which is having an impact on attendance rates across all levels and in all schools.
- Data entry personnel have become more proficient in the use of the CASES 21 attendance package and other electronic roll marking systems. Attendance data is more accurate and detailed, and is integral to the improvement process.
- An enhancement of awareness of student attendance issues and expertise in the implementation of appropriate proactive strategies in the staffs of all network schools.
- An increase in the early identification of 'at risk' students. These students have been given appropriate and coordinated support.
- An increase in the engagement of community agencies in the case management of individual students and their families and in the number of joint programs between network schools and community agencies.
- The collaborative approach developed between network schools has resulted in the development of further links and an increase in the sharing of skills, knowledge and resources. Schools are now working together cooperatively from Network level through to the management and support of individual students and families. The network is an active place where there is a discernible 'network culture'.
- The project is widely recognised as a good practice model and has informed DE&T regional strategy and professional learning activities as well as many individual schools, other attendance projects, and community agency forums and programs. The project has been profiled in both print and television media.

Messages from participants

Throughout the project ongoing feedback from participants about the School Participation Project and its outcomes informed the work. Formal and informal feedback was collected and collated to allow for a rigorous approach to the development of the project over time. Structured opportunities included focused sessions with all individual Principals, the Principal Steering Group, the Attendance Working Group, the Student Wellbeing Group, the Senior Education Officer from the Northern Metropolitan Regional Office, representatives from the Bursars and Office Managers Group and representatives from parents. Formal focused sessions were also held with students and community agency personnel including representatives from the School Focused Youth Service, mental health services and local family support agencies. Structured feedback sessions were facilitated by the project evaluator and focused on the participants' experiences of the work of the School Participation Project.

Informal feedback informed the day-to-day operation of the work through having the School Participation Project Officer articulate participant experiences in a reflective approach. Regular observations provided insight for formal reflection and debriefing with the Project evaluator/mentor, which formed the basis of regular reporting back to relevant groups. In this manner the Officer directed the work in line with the stated strategic planning.

Feedback from the **Principals** recognised the benefit of having the School Participation Officer take responsibility for and provide targeted attention to student attendance in their schools. They acknowledged the benefit of having an external voice in supporting challenging non-attendance cases.

They stated that the role of Officer required a person with the following characteristics:

- The wisdom, skills and expertise of an experienced educator
- The capacity to work across all levels of the Network with high levels of professionalism and a respect for confidentiality
- The ability to work effectively with a diverse group of schools and develop focused strategies tailored to the needs of the individual school communities. The Officer needed to cater for the distinct nature of local school concerns whilst also recognising the commonality between the schools
- The confidence to support the development of links within and outside the Network and to effectively profile the work of the project to the wider community

Principals were aware that attempts at transferring the Network model would need to address the preparation or training of potential School Participation Officers and would also require the allocation of appropriate remuneration for the work i.e. at the level of Leading Teacher.

When asked to comment on the Network approach adopted in the School Participation Project they stated that:

- Network schools had benefited greatly from shared knowledge, understanding and resources
- The Principals now enjoyed a more cohesive collegiate group as a result of working collaboratively and cooperatively on the project work
- They recognised the emergence of a discernable network culture
- The Working Groups have fostered effective collaboration between the schools and have noticeably influenced the way that the individual schools operate
- The Project has resulted in educational benefits beyond the confines of the focus on student attendance
- Valuable professional learning opportunities have led to increased staff professional confidence and optimism
- They were thrilled to note how individual school and Network student attendance levels have been positively impacted by the improvement strategies

Feedback from the **Attendance Working Group** recognised the following:

- They have benefited from having purposeful, well-organized and regular meetings and appreciated that these meetings provided relevant professional learning and the opportunity to share their individual attendance work. Having rotating meetings allowed staff to learn more about the other Network schools.
- The sharing of local solutions to attendance and participation facilitated understanding of the commonality of the population across the schools. This was particularly helpful where schools were dealing with the same families across different local schools.
- Through their combined work they had been able to appreciate the diversity of the individual schools.

- The benefits of Network collegiality and of the individual school focused support from the School Participation Officer. They particularly appreciated the mentoring relationship provided by the School Participation Officer.
- Having access to the School Participation Officer empowered the Attendance Working Group in the day-to-day procedural work on attendance.
- They valued having an evidence-based strategic approach that informed direction for their particular contexts and they also welcomed the opportunity to develop individual strategies suited their unique situations.
- Improved skills and understanding of the importance of data collection and analysis were developed and have become essential tools in their work. The regular monitoring of attendance data have also become an effective tool in their work with students.
- They appreciated an approach that focused and incorporated a framework for preventative measures and the early identification of potential problems whilst at the same time supporting the change processes for more entrenched issues.
- Their work in the Project provided the members with useful ideas for professional learning for their school communities and staff meetings through sharing tools, resources, newsletter items and proforma.
- They enjoyed having the ability to make clear statements to parents about attendance and appreciated the support and modelling of the School Participation Officer in attendance meetings. Having the external authority of the School Participation Officer allowed a team approach and the use of a 'good cop bad cop' strategy in supporting their work with individuals.
- They recognised that they were at the cutting edge of the attendance work and appreciated being spokespeople for the Network in external professional learning forums.
- They acknowledged the links between attendance and the broader current challenges and issues in schools and they articulated an enhanced understanding of school improvement work as part of the core business of educators.

Feedback from **teachers** indicated that they recognised and appreciated the following:

- They have an increased understanding of issues surrounding student attendance
- Improved student attendance has supported more continuous and consistent implementation of programs

- They have a key role in the daily monitoring of student attendance. They enjoyed being able to work at the classroom level with children and families who were not attending regularly.
- They appreciated clear statements being made about attendance coming from leadership in the school.
- They welcomed having student attendance as part of professional reviews as it allowed them to set targets and closely monitor their student group.
- More collaborative approaches to working with wellbeing staff allowed them to enhance their knowledge and understanding of their work with individual students and families.
- They found the support of the School Participation Officer useful especially in discerning the most appropriate approach and script to use in individual cases. They appreciated having the School Participation Officer available as a secondary consult when their own strategies were not effective.
- They liked the parent information sessions focused on attendance as they supported their work with students and families.
- They recognised the stronger Network links with other schools created by the School Participation Project and enjoyed the contact and enrichment that came from their work with teachers from other schools.
- They were enthused by the pleasing result of improving data in their own classes especially the lowering levels of unexplained absences.
- They were impressed by the strategic approach used in the project and they appreciated the student centred focus.

Feedback from **data entry personnel** indicated the following:

- They recognised their role in the early identification of non-attending students and also recognised that accurate data was an essential tool for informing school improvement processes and strategies.
- They expressed increased confidence and empowerment due to the intensive training facilitated by working regularly with the School Participation Officer and Attendance Working Group members. They were particularly pleased with the expertise developed in the use of CASES 21 codes and the generation of summary reports.
- They felt supported by membership of the Network Bursar and Office Management Group which provided avenues for direct contact and assistance from other data entry personnel.

Feedback from **Student Wellbeing staff** indicated that:

- They acknowledged learning from the experience of the School Participation Officer especially in the use of attendance data for the early identification of students and also in working more collaboratively and cooperatively with teachers. They appreciated having the School Participation Officer's presence in case meetings, and were particularly receptive to the modelling, mentoring and support in linking with community agencies.
- They recognised the benefits of the use of data in the early intervention strategies of the Project and also applauded the fact that it provided opportunities for a more preventative approach.
- There was improved understanding of the causal factors of student absenteeism and this knowledge influenced the intervention strategies employed.
- They saw more clearly how student wellbeing work connects to school improvement and also to the student's educational needs and learning outcomes.
- They learned from the reengagement strategies used with students and had a better understanding of the need for a flexible approach when working with parents.
- The Project provided them with opportunities to meet as a group and this supported them in their work. They hoped to consolidate the formation of a cohesive Network collegiate group and appreciated holding meetings in other Network schools.
- They welcomed the shared professional learning that comes from shared work between schools. Wellbeing staff especially appreciated the opportunity of secondary consultation with professional colleagues. They also recognised the benefits of shared casework with common families between schools.

The **Northern Metropolitan Region** was involved from the very beginning of the School Participation Project. The work of the project was reported to regional staff through project reports to the principals and direct communication with the School Participation Officer.

Feedback from **regional personnel** included:

- Appreciation of being kept informed of the work of the project as many aspects of the project work were fed into regional professional learning activities and informed the development of regional strategic direction. Senior Northern Metropolitan staff also expressed appreciation of the findings of the work and attended Attendance Working Group meetings

- Recognition of the strengths of the Yarra Network model. The project was considered a good example of how a network can operate effectively.
- Recognition that the project work complemented the work of regional personnel because the School Participation Officer was able to intensively support each school at the coalface. The School Participation Officer was acknowledged for guidance and support of regional personnel.
- Acknowledgement of the positive impact of the Yarra Schools Network attendance work on both Yarra Network and regional data.

Feedback from **parents** through Parent Association meetings, information sessions and attendance meetings indicated:

- They appreciated receiving clear statements about attendance and welcomed input on the implications of irregular attendance at school.
- They welcomed feedback about their own child's attendance data. They welcomed assistance approaches they could use for following up attendance issues at home.
- They appreciated a collaborative approach in looking for solutions for their children. They also appreciated the flexibility that schools exhibited in meetings and the use of interpreters and translated materials. They responded to the non-punitive and non-judgmental approach and the opportunity to devise and work on approaches as a member of a cooperative team.
- They enjoyed being empowered as parents through working individually with the School Participation Officer and other school personnel. They appreciated the level of organisation and skills that was available to support them.
- They recognised the benefit of referral to outside agencies.
- They liked the close monitoring and immediate communication about attendance problems.

Feedback from **students** included appreciation of the following:

- The heightened focus on attendance because of the positive impact it had on the provision of more continuous and consistent learning in individual classes.
- The clear statements and expectations about attendance and the systematic approaches implemented for follow up.

- Counselling support for attendance issues. They appreciated working on goal setting for their future and related to the links being made between regular attendance and future personal outcomes and success.
- The support and clarity that resulted from return to school planning
- Regular access to their own attendance data and the understanding that came from calculation of lost learning opportunities. They were excited by the opportunity to watch their own attendance data improve as they made changes to their habits.
- The close monitoring of student attendance as it leads to the students feeling more supported and secure in a more predictable environment.

Feedback from **community agencies** recognised that:

- Schools need to work on intensive attendance improvement strategies.
- A network approach is a very effective way of supporting schools in improving attendance. An effective network enabled and enhanced mutual support and collaboration between community agencies and schools and allowed agencies to work more effectively with schools in the initiation and implementation of joint projects and initiatives.
- The School Participation Project as an exemplary model for community development as it fostered the creation of a supportive and cohesive community with shared vision, genuine coalition and enhanced learning.
- The School Participation Project was also a good model for evidence-based approaches.
- There was improved support of parents and students through enhanced secondary consultation. There had been a noticeable increase in the number of referrals from Network schools as a result of the focus on attendance issues.
- There was a noticeable increase in the number of brokerage funding applications from Network schools and an increase in the initiation of joint projects between Network schools and community agencies.
- The linkage and liaison provided by School Participation Officer was invaluable and helped to break down the barriers between schools and the local community.

Some Comments and Reflections from the School Participation Officer

Underpinning the implementation of the School Participation Project was the wisdom, foresight and strong leadership of the principals of the Yarra Schools Network. Their active discussions and careful planning in the formative stages of the project ensured both shared vision and dynamic ownership. The development of a Network attendance improvement process involving the utilisation of a coordinating officer was enlightened. It supported ideals of genuine coalition and collaboration and the implementation of shared leadership approaches, whilst at the same time attempting to address a recognised common challenge. The skilful realization of DE&T funding for support of the project encouraged the Network to put thoughts of extreme diversity and competing capacities to the side, and to embark upon a new era of collaboration and cooperation in the attainment of common goals.

The strategic approach supported by action research was made possible by the generous ongoing contribution of the project evaluator Christina Walta (RMIT University). Our regular meetings have ensured a critical and reflective approach whilst at the same time provided professional support for a position that was potentially isolated.

A recognisable strength of the ongoing work of the project was the implementation of this evidence-based approach, which was planned, implemented and owned by all schools. It was exciting to watch the enthusiasm of the participants fuelled by direct evidence and improving data. They welcomed regular feedback on the work of the project and relished the stories of new understandings and successes from their own and other schools.

Another essential strategy was the implementation of individual school action plans for whole school approaches. This demonstrated the need for holistic evidence driven approaches addressing all seven key areas of the *Attendance–Clever Schools* model. My involvement clearly illustrated that schools need intensive support, modelling and clear and workable strategies to achieve improvement in student attendance. This demands strong, shared leadership at the coalface, and therefore the expertise of experienced educators.

The Project working groups, particularly the Project Steering Group and the Attendance Working Group, were pivotal to the success of the project. These groups allowed the sharing of knowledge and resources and provided rigorous professional learning for the participants. It was pleasing to witness the constant spread of ideas and the enthusiastic trailing of new approaches across the Network. Of particular merit within the project model was the fact that these groups met separately and therefore enjoyed targeted and relevant discussion and training. This enriched the individual school improvement teams comprising representatives from each of the working groups. The overall success of the project is ultimately a result of the enthusiastic and active contribution of school personnel from all levels of school operation.

One of the most rewarding and pleasing aspects of the project work was the focus on prevention and early intervention strategies for improving student attendance. There was general recognition that the clear statements of expectations made to parents and students right from the early years of schooling could only lead to increased awareness and improved habits and routines. The Network primary schools took great pride in establishing regular attendance and improved transition programs, knowing that these factors could improve the participation and engagement of students in their secondary years. The secondary schools could see the direct link between project initiatives and the improved focus and engagement of students at a crucial point in their education.

One of my most enduring memories of the project work will be the information given to me by students in focused sessions and attendance meetings. The message was repeated over and over again; students both want and expect schools to have high expectations and to enforce tight attendance monitoring procedures. Many expressed disbelief and disappointment at the school's failure to do this. They welcomed the support, predictability and routine resultant of more stringent policies and procedures.

Similarly, I was constantly surprised by the reactions of parents in attendance meetings. Many voiced gratitude for the intervention, as they had previously felt isolated and powerless in their attempts to improve the situation. They expressed personal empowerment through the inclusive, sensitive and collaborative approaches used. Most welcomed the support from both the school and from referral to external agencies and also appreciated the organised and coordinated approaches with their child. Some made a point of feeding back positive changes they had noticed in their child's development as a result of the intervention.

Parents also welcomed the articulation of clear policies and procedures and the immediate follow up of non-attendance. They expressed the mutual benefit that is gained by organised contact between the parent and the school on days when a student is absent.

Through parent and student interventions it also became apparent that there is a definite need for schools to have systemic back up in some cases of chronic absenteeism. As a perceived independent person I was able to provide the essential voice of an 'external authority' to reinforce the messages that the schools were giving to parents and students. At times the School Participation Officer role encompassed some of the functions of the traditional truancy officer. It is of concern that schools and networks report that there is a serious risk of students and parents falling between the cracks of community safety nets due to the lack of enforcement of student attendance legislation and coordinated follow-up by government education and community support authorities. Many students who had come into the Network to enrol in 'alternative settings' reported that they had missed years of schooling due to little or no follow up from their original schools. Yarra Network schools have accordingly recognised the need for coordinated follow-up of disengaging

students, stringent student transfer procedures and close collaborative approaches with community family support agencies.

In conclusion, my role in the Yarra Schools Network Student Participation Project has given me a bird's eye view of the power of network cooperation, collaboration, and shared use of knowledge and resources. I have been privileged to both support and be an integral part of the transformation of this group of schools into *Attendance-Clever Schools* and an *Attendance-Clever Network*. I have watched the noticeable development of network culture and identity with schools now proudly members of the *Yarra Schools Network*. I bear witness to the fact that networks can transform into active learning communities through recognition of shared vision and purpose, supported by appropriate funding, leadership and support.

Zita Pinda
School Participation Officer
Yarra Schools Network

APPENDIX 1

Yarra Schools Network School Participation Project

Role Description for the School Participation Officer

The objectives of the role are to:

- Develop, implement and evaluate a systematic approach that addresses the need to reduce absenteeism and truancy across all year levels (P-12).
- Build community links and partnerships and to provide leadership in the development of collaborative programs to address the issues of attendance and truancy.
- Work with students, their teachers, family and/or carers to develop strategies, which improve attendance at school, promote school retention, improve learning outcomes and provide coordinated support to targeted young people, their families and/or carers.
- Facilitate professional development for network schools, with a focus on primary prevention and early intervention strategies.
- Increase levels of engagement in curricular and extra-curricular activities for young people in special settings.
- Increase participation of parents in school activities, both during and after school hours.
- Establish links to other programs, such as the Innovations and Excellence program, primary/secondary transition programs, Police in Schools programs, etc
- Strengthen cooperation between Network schools.
- Demonstrate that the role of the SPO is an effective means of reducing absenteeism and truancy throughout a network of schools.

The key responsibilities of the role are:

- Under the direction of the Yarra Schools Network principals, and in liaison with student welfare coordinators, provide individual support, guidance and counselling to those not attending school.
- Develop appropriate Network-wide programs to address student absenteeism and truancy in association with the City of Yarra, the School Focused Youth Service, the Department of Human Services and other local agencies.
- Develop Network-wide and school specific programs to further engage parents and families of students to participate in their child's education.
- Develop Network-wide and school specific programs to further engage particular cohorts of disaffected youth to maintain their attendance and successful participation and retention in education.
- Examine and strengthen school environments and culture including school policy and programs and procedures that relate to truancy and attendance.
- Develop a referral tool, protocols and framework for service pathways.

APPENDIX 2

Yarra Schools Network Student Attendance Protocol

The schools of the Yarra Schools Network recognise:

- Student success is determined by regular attendance at school. Students need to attend school regularly in order to participate fully and gain maximum benefit from their schooling.
- Student attendance is dependant on a supportive school environment, a curriculum that provides for all students, and structures and approaches that facilitate the success of all students.
- All students should have access to a full education and be given opportunity to take advantage of all the educational opportunities available to them.
- The school is an important link with the community for all students and their families.
- Schools need to be accountable and exercise their duty of care in monitoring and enforcing full attendance for all students, as well as identifying and giving support to 'at risk' students.
- Attendance depends on active cooperation between the school, parent/carers and students.
- Parents/carers need to be given the opportunity to recognise their responsibility in ensuring that their children attend school regularly.
- Student attendance is fundamental to the role of teachers and so all staff need to be actively and cooperatively involved in its maintenance and need to model good practice around attendance and punctuality.

All schools of the network are committed to:

- Implementation, and cyclical review, of active and transparent attendance policies and practices.
- Maintenance of a detailed understanding of student attendance as an issue in schools and the implementation and cyclical review of improvement strategies.
- Regular discussion of attendance issues at staff forums with improvement of student attendance seen as a high priority.

- Rigorous data gathering procedures including the full use where relevant of the CASES 21 codes and practices enabling period by period monitoring of students.
- Prompt formal communication with other schools to facilitate the transfer of students.
- Regular audits and detailed analysis of attendance data and monitoring procedures.
- Implementation of the DE&T guideline of classifying students who are not in attendance for two hours before noon as absent for one half day and students who are not in attendance for two hours after noon as absent for one half day.
- Procedures which enable the early identification of 'at risk' students. The target group is students who have had five absences in a six-month period that have not been satisfactorily explained to the school.
- Implementation of practices that minimise the number of 'unexplained' absences.
- Pastoral care structures and policies that enable the constructive support of students and their families. This includes regular contact with the parents/cares of students with poor attendance patterns.
- The development of links with local support agencies to enable secondary consultation and referral of individual cases.
- The implementation of community education strategies including information sessions, brochures, newsletter items and classroom activities.
- The inclusion of summary student attendance data on student progress reports.
- The development of links with local community support agencies and other community groups to foster shared ownership of, and a community approach to, attendance issues.
- Active membership of the Yarra Schools Network Attendance Working Group.

RESOURCE

How clever is your school at improving attendance? An Audit Tool

Strategy	Beg	Con	Est
Clearly stated expectations			
Development of transparent and workable policy and procedures documents			
Consultative and collaborative approach used in policy development			
Policies and procedures reviewed regularly			
Clear verbal statements made to teachers, parents and students about school and community attendance expectations			
Regular and effective statements in school publications.			
Modelling of regular attendance and punctuality by all staff.			
Effective use of data			
Accurate and rigorous data gathering and recording procedures			
Regular analysis of attendance data			
Accurate and correct use of CASES 21 codes or equivalent			
Regular 'clean ups' of data			
Effective student transfer and enrolment procedures			
Early Identification of patterns of absenteeism for individual students and groups of students			
Use of accurate data to inform evaluation and planning			
Use of accurate data to regularly inform students and parents.			
Strategic Direction			
Attendance made a key priority in strategic and annual implementation plans			
Attendance improvement directly linked to school vision and strategic direction			
Articulation of clear, achievable and measurable goals and outcomes			
Establishment of clear prioritization and realistic timelines			
Team agreement on who is responsible for action			
Use of varied data gathering techniques			
Professional Learning Opportunities			
Regular discussions and facilitated sessions in staff forums on attendance and engagement issues			
Leadership mentoring and modelling with staff			
Discussion of attendance improvement strategies in performance review meetings			
Sharing knowledge and understandings with network schools and community agencies			
Participation in external professional learning opportunities			
Prevention			
Effective monitoring of student attendance including where appropriate period by period approach			
Early identification of at risk students			
Implementation of transition support programs.			
Well-developed student wellbeing programs and student mentoring structures			
Raising student awareness of the importance of regular attendance			
Creation of learning environments, which are supportive, purposeful and productive			
Individual student learning plans which include attendance and punctuality goals			
Creation of safe and supportive school environments			
Provision of out of school programs including breakfast, homework and walking bus clubs			
Parents actively involved in the life of the school			
Provision of parenting programs			
Modification of the timetable to enable maximize student attendance			

Strategy	Beg	Con	Est
Support for Students and parents			
Development of collaborative, cooperative and empowering relationships with individual students and their parents			
Use of Inclusive practices including translation of materials and the use of interpreters			
Immediate and apparent follow-up to individual student absence			
Development of a knowledge and understanding of the different types and causal factors of individual student's absence and the response and support required			
Establishment of appropriate forums for multi-disciplinary discussion and support of individual students and their families			
Adoption of appropriate protocols and procedures for inside and outside referrals for support			
Mentoring programs for identified students			
Organization of attendance meetings with students and parents			
Flexibility with meeting venues to include home or 'off-site' meetings when necessary			
Use of Individual Student goal setting and improvement plans			
Transparent and immediate action on any problems identified by the parents and/or student			
Parenting Education programs			
Positive support and follow-up with students on their return to school including the use of return to school plans,			
Flexibility and modification of expected learning tasks for individual students			
Network and Community Links			
Collaborative joint programs with network schools and community agencies			
Understanding of the key stakeholders in student attendance work			
Membership of school network groups			
Outside referral of students and parents for family, social or emotional support			
Joint network transition initiatives			
Membership of collaborative and consultative forums with local community agencies			
Regular communication with the DE&T regional office			

RESOURCE

Sample Newsletter Item 1

Student Attendance

It is important for all students to be at school every day. With winter approaching, there will be many students who experience coughs, colds and other minor illnesses. When deciding whether to keep your child home from school, please consider the following:

A child should be at school unless;

The child is too sick to leave the house. Generally, if a child is not sick enough to need to see a doctor, then the child should be at school.

The child has an infectious disease like measles, chicken pox or mumps.

The child has an injury preventing movement around school.

The child is going on a family holiday that cannot be arranged during school holidays. This must be arranged with the principal in advance.

The principal is provided with any genuine and acceptable reason preventing the child's attendance.

A medical or dental appointment could not be made out of school hours (wherever possible, appointments should be made out of school hours)

On your child's return, a note must be supplied to explain the days missed. You should also contact the school in advance if you know your child will be away. If your child has seen a medical practitioner (eg doctor or dentist) a certificate or appointment card will help explain the absence

Remember

If students miss the basic skills in the early years of schooling they often experience learning difficulties later on.

There is a direct link between attendance and achievement.

It has been shown that poor patterns of attendance in the early years can lead to poor patterns of attendance throughout the school years.

Poor attendance makes it difficult for students to form positive friendships with their peers.

Sample Newsletter Item 2

Extended Family Holidays

Principal Approval For Extended Student Absences

If there is some known reason which requires your child to miss school for an extended time (eg. operation, overseas trip, etc.), parents are asked to discuss the matter with their Classroom Teacher first and then inform the Principal. You will need to complete a written form notifying the school of the details. Work may be set for your child when the absence is to be for

an extended period. Please see the Principal or the multicultural aides if you need assistance in completing this application.

We urge parents to use the school holiday periods for their family holidays if at all possible and to avoid having their children miss classes immediately before and after scheduled holidays.

Remember, children need to attend school regularly to make the most of the educational opportunities available to them. There is a direct link between attendance and achievement. Also, poor attendance can make it difficult for children to form positive relationships with their peers.

Sample Newsletter Item 3

Lateness

The teaching staff has raised some concern that many students are arriving late for school on a fairly regular basis. Unfortunately this is a situation that can have a negative effect on the education of not only those students who are late, but also the other students in the class.

What impact does being late have on the student?

Students who are late miss a lot of instructions and information about what is happening, not to mention important learning situations. This means that they have to catch up somehow. It's like being late to see a movie and not being able to understand what's happening because you don't know who the characters are and what the plot is.

Students can feel unsettled, disorganized and unhappy for the rest of the day and it can take them some time to complete and understand the work that they have missed.

How does it affect the other students in the class?

Students who are late have an unsettling effect on the rest of the class. Because not all late students arrive at once, the interruptions go on until the last student is settled. Students who are late often have things that need to be done prior to them joining the class and this causes even more disruption. Sometimes other students have to wait to get the teachers attention and important issues can be forgotten.

Why does student lateness cause difficulties for the teacher?

The teacher has a certain amount of material and activities to cover each lesson. Also, organizational issues are usually dealt with at the beginning of the day. Teachers can become increasingly frustrated when late students continually and repeatedly interrupt their planned routines, as they have to stop teaching to deal with the issues involved.

We are all human. Cars can break down and unexpected situations can occur. We know that family morning routines are not always straightforward. If you are experiencing problems, speak to us, as we may be able to offer suggestions to help.

We are happy to accept that students will be late on the odd occasion because of unforeseen circumstances. However, arriving late on a regular basis is not acceptable

Remember

Being half an hour late to school each day from prep to year 10 adds up to missing the equivalent of one year and one and a half terms of school.

RESOURCE

Network Script for Parent Information Sessions

A common script was developed for delivery of information to parents at all parent information sessions. Statements were kept short and clear and Interpreters were used when relevant.

The key statements included information about:

- The value of education
- Current research showing the link between regular attendance and positive social, emotional and learning outcomes for students
- The direct correlations between poor attendance and student disengagement and being exposed to 'at risk' behaviours
- Government legislation requirements that enforce the community shared belief that education is both valuable and important
- The sequential nature of student learning - An analogy of a brick wall is used. Missing bricks represents days missed from school. With bricks missing here and there, the structure of the wall is weakened and will eventually fall down
- The need to develop good routines and patterns right from the early years
- Unacceptable reasons for allowing a child to stay home from school, including fulfilling adult duties such as child- minding and interpreting, keeping an adult company, visiting friends and relatives, shopping trips, birthdays, 'mental health days'
- Reluctance to go to school can be a sign that the child is attempting to avoid particular situations such as incomplete homework, assessment tasks, and problems with friends. They need to be supported in working through these situations
- The need for punctuality and the impact lateness can have on student learning and classroom routines
- The policies, expectations and procedures for the school
- The roles and responsibilities of teachers, parents and students
- The support services available to families experiencing difficulties

RESOURCE

Professional Learning Activity- Raising staff awareness

An initial attendance professional learning activity for a 20 minute session in a school staff meeting

Participants are asked to look at the list of statements below and choose one to share their thoughts on with the members of the group

(Note that some of the statements are deliberately extreme in order to encourage a reaction)

1. The benchmark for student attendance in Victorian government school is around 12 days per year.
2. The school is the only link with community that many families and children and adolescents have.
3. Missing one day per week from prep to year 10 means missing two years and one term of schooling. Being absent five days a term adds up to more than one year of missed schooling.
4. It is a common belief that children need mental health days
5. The community undervalues the need for children and adolescents to be at school.
6. Attendance will always be a problem until Truancy Officers are reintroduced.
7. Students' being late for school is a fact of life for schools.
8. Students in NSW are being issued with leave passes for when they are out of the school. The Police should round up the rest and take them back to school.
9. Parents of students who do not attend school should be fined and/or prosecuted.
10. Students who miss 25 days per year from year 7 to year 12 miss the equivalent of 3 terms of secondary schooling.

RESOURCE

How many days has your child missed this semester?

0-6 *This is within normal range. A child with this attendance rate is able to take full advantage of the teaching and learning opportunities available to them.*

7-10 *This attendance rate is below average. A child with this attendance rate could miss over one year of schooling between prep and year 10.*

11-20 *This is a poor attendance rate. A child with this attendance rate could miss out on up to two years of schooling between prep and year 10.*

20+ *This is a very poor attendance rate. A child with this attendance rate could miss over two and one half years of schooling between prep and year 10.*

Remember

Students need to attend school regularly to make the most of educational opportunities.

There is a direct link between school attendance and achievement later in life.

Poor patterns of attendance in the early years lead to poor patterns of attendance throughout the school years.

Poor attendance makes it difficult for children to form positive relationships with their peers.

When young people are in school every day, they are safer and less likely to be victims of crime, or become involved in crime.

RESOURCE

Text from the Yarra Schools Network Attendance Brochure School Attendance and Your Child

Why is attendance at school important?

Students need to attend school regularly to make the most of educational opportunities.

There is a direct link between attendance and achievement.

Poor patterns of attendance in the early years can lead to poor patterns of attendance throughout the school years.

Poor attendance makes it difficult for students to form positive relationships with their peers.

When young people are in school every day, they are safer and less likely to be victims of crime, or become involved in crime.

All students who are enrolled at school are expected to attend each day

Government legislation requires young people under the age of 15 to attend school. Students over the age of 15 who are enrolled at school are expected to have a commitment to attend on all designated school days.

The only exceptions are

- The student is too sick to leave the home or has an infectious disease or an injury preventing movement around the school
- A medical or dental appointment could not be made out of school hours
- The Principal is provided with a genuine or acceptable reason preventing the student's attendance

Responsibility of parents and caregivers

Ensure that your child attends school on all designated school days.

Only allow your child to be absent from school if there is a legitimate reason.

Immediately notify the school if your child is going to be absent. When your child returns to school, send a note to the classroom teacher, which clearly outlines the reason for your child's absence.

Ensure that your child is on time for school every day.

What should you do if your child refuses to go to school?

You should immediately contact the school to seek assistance.

Reluctance to attend school is sometimes an indication that a student is experiencing social or emotional problems.

RESOURCE

RECORD OF ATTENDANCE MEETING

Date

Student's name

Year level

Participants

Issues or challenges identified

Proposed actions to further support the student.

Date and arrangements for review meeting

RESOURCE

Professional Learning Activity- Improving Attendance through Support for Students and Parents

A half hour activity for a staff meeting

In small groups, participants are asked to take one of the case studies and decide upon possible appropriate actions and interventions to improve the situation. They should do this under the following headings:

Suggested student focused actions

Suggested parent focused actions

Possible whole school preventative initiatives

Possible involvement of community agencies

Case Study 1: Jack and Bill

Jack and Bill are in years 3&5 respectively. They attend a small inner city primary school. They live with their mother in high-rise public housing. Their parents are separated and they have little contact with their father. They are the youngest of an older now adult family.

They have had extremely poor attendance records in the past missing up to 60 days per year. The mother has not responded to past requests for the boys to come to school more often. Both boys are struggling academically. The mother has also been reluctant to allow intervention for speech and other intellectual assessments and has missed many arranged meetings.

Case Study 2: Lucy

Lucy is fourteen and in year 8. She attends a large inner city secondary school. She is second generation Australian and of Vietnamese descent. She lives with her mother and two primary aged brothers in low-rise public housing. Her parents have recently separated.

Lucy had a good attendance record in year 7, but missed four weeks at the beginning of year 8 due to family holiday to Vietnam. On her return Lucy exhibited emotional problems and social problems at home necessitating the intervention of Austin CAMHS and DHS. Lucy's mother allowed her to stay home when she wanted and Lucy's attendance became very sporadic. Lucy announced that they intended to take another trip to Vietnam later in the year.

Case Study 3: Tony

Tony is fourteen and is in year 9. He attends a large inner city secondary school. He is third generation Australian and is of Italian descent. He lives with his mother and younger brother in low-rise public housing. His parents are separated. Local information indicates that his mother has some substance abuse issues.

Tony's attendance is inconsistent, missing at least one day per week and he is late on most others. Contact with the mother showed that she was unaware of the absences but has not been able to improve the situation. Tony is struggling academically and is showing signs of dropping out of school. He is a talented football player and is very connected to the local junior club

Case Study 4: Claire

Claire is in year 3. She attends a small inner city primary school. Claire is an only child and lives with her mother and father.

Claire has been late most days and up to one and a half hours late at times. She also has had an above average number of absent days each year. Her parents like to take her on interstate holidays during term time in order to gain cheaper travel rates. Past attempts at improving the situation through parent contact have been unsuccessful. Claire is very bright intellectually but is showing signs of struggling in the maths and literacy learning areas.

RESOURCE

STUDENT ATTENDANCE PROFILE

Name

Year Level

Date

Parent/carer contact details

Mother's / Carer's name

Phone

Address

Father's name

Phone

Address

Number of days absent/late

--

Reasons given

--

Patterns of absence?

Explanation given by parents/carers
--

Is there a particular staff member who the student identifies with?
--

Contact with parents/carers.

Telephone call
Letter home
Home visit
Other

Other Information

--

Recommendations for action or referral

--

RESOURCE

Remaining clever about attendance throughout the year

Each week

1. Enter data at least once a week but preferably daily. If possible ring every parent every day. Ensure that follow-up phone calls have been made by the end of each week.

2. Check student attendance levels and give classroom teachers summary reports at least once a fortnight.

Use the following CASES 21 reports:

ST 21314 Absence Report Type by Whole School

ST 21316 Student Absence Summary by Home Group

Check:

Explanation documentation and any unexplained absences.

The number of absences for particular students especially any targeted students.

Absence patterns for particular students.

Each month

1. Send CASES 21 letters or similar at the end of the month.

2. Look summary attendance reports at least once a month. Use the following CASES 21 reports:

ST 21314 Absence Report Type by Whole School

ST 21316 Student Absence Summary by Home Group

SXAB21330 Unapproved absence Summary (for whole school)

3. Hold discussions and professional development activities about attendance at staff meetings.

4. Remain abreast with other ideas by participating in discussions with other schools and regional professional development activities. Do an Internet search using key terms such as “ school attendance”, “ school absenteeism “, “ truancy “, “ school retention “ etc.

5. Provide staff and parents with regular updates on data.

6. Include an item about attendance on the parent newsletter.

Each semester

1. Complete thorough six monthly analyses of data. Use excel graphs to assist the process.

Use the following CASES 21 reports:

ST 21314 Absence Report Type by Whole School
SXAB21330 Unapproved absence Summary (for whole school)
ST 21316 Student Absence Summary by Home Group
ST 21317 Student Absence Summary by Year Level
ST 21318 Half Day attendance under 80 per cent
ST 21314 Absence Report Type for Whole School- Extended Family holiday.

Consider:

Average number of absences per student in each year level compared with same level and state mean of year before.

Overall average number of days per student P-6 or 7-12 compared with same level and state mean of year before.

The absence rate for girls compared with boys.

The number of days absence per student for particular reasons e.g. extended family holiday; parent choice etc.

The number of unexplained absences per student at each level and for the school as a whole.

2. Ensure that absence data is on all student progress reports.

3. Keep information about attendance issues and expectations on the agenda at all parent teacher conferences and parent information nights.

Each year

1. Set annual targets and include attendance as a priority on all strategic and annual implementation plans.

2. Make follow-up of attendance the responsibility of each teacher and include as a listed responsibility for performance reviews.

3. Ensure that new and replacement staff is given details of attendance policies and procedures.

4. Set processes are in place to enable the cyclical review of all policies and procedures.

5. Circulate an information brochure to all parents and publish the attendance policy in the parent newsletter.