# IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE



28-Aug-14

MOUNT ALEXANDER SUMMIT REPORT

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## INTRODUCTION

The growing body of international and local research into the impact of school absenteeism is demonstrating strong correlations between students' attendance and participation in education programs and longer term life outcomes. Poor patterns of attendance place students at risk of not achieving their educational, social and psychological potential and while the underlying causes remain unaddressed, it is likely that the pattern of non attendance will persist and escalate associated poor outcomes.  Legislation was passed in 2013 to provide Victorian School Principals with a clearer process for escalating issues of non- attendance and non-enrolment and a program of support materials made available for schools under the banner of 'Every Day Counts'.

> In 2013 the average number of days absent for primary students in Mount Alexander Shire was 17 days. The average number of days absent for secondary students was15 days

In response to concern about this attendance data, the Mount Alexander Principal network hosted an 'all of sector summit in August 2014 to discuss current and future strategies towards improving school attendance rates.

Representatives from all local schools; training organisations; education department officials; local and state government officers; koori support and welfare officers, community service providers; business and community leaders attended the half day summit.

Presentations on current research (Margaret Bainbridge); strategies that work in schools (Mary-Anne Rooney and Mathew Pearce) and a report on factors affecting school engagement for youth (Jo Wedgwood and Cath Butler) were given. Summaries of these presentations are appended.

Participants then worked in groups to reflect on the wide range of possible factors underlying school absences and work shopped potential strategies to address these, considering actions that could be commenced immediately and those that would require further planning and resources; those that could be initiated within schools and those that would require wider community involvement. 'Ideal world' suggestions were encouraged as well as those achievable with present resources. Original suggestions were grouped by theme, falling into a logical action sequence which is the basis of the first draft of a collective impact action plan for consideration.

# REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING SCHOOL

Common reasons given for absences are that the child feels unwell, is tired, has a medical or other appointment; doesn't feel like going to school or is needing a 'special day' with a parent.

## *Child feeling unwell / not wanting to go to school that day*

These were recognized as a strongly 'value influenced' decisions, making it especially difficult to determine when to challenge parental judgment. Excluding legitimate illness, other underlying causes for deciding a child is unable to attend could be:

- The child experiencing problems with friends or teachers
- Avoidance of tests or other activities that the child feels are stressful
- Avoidance of consequences for not completing tasks/previous misconduct etc.
- Child 'not coping' academically with school work
- Embarrassment about appearance (weight, lack of appropriate clothing)
- Reduced family support- e.g. no costume for the dress up day
- Lack of sufficient nutrition- no lunch / breakfast
- Not wanting to participate in planned activities such as sports
- Lack of confidence/anxiety about having to present work (assemblies for example)
- Separation anxiety (especially following weekends and holidays)
- Tiredness due to late nights/poor sleep/excessive use of electronic devices
- Anxiety caused by bullying
- Stress caused by problems at home/ domestic violence
- Parents unavailable or unable to assist the child to get ready and travel to school
- Barriers created by financial stress- e.g. no petrol, food
- Lack of engagement with curriculum
- Parent needing the assistance of the child with domestic/family responsibilities
- Poor role modelling by parents and/or older siblings
- Chaotic households with lack of routine
- Preference for out of school activities available on the day

## *Having a special day with a parent*

It was thought that this is often a parent driven excuse that can be more about the parents' needs than the child's. Concern was expressed that this kind of reason for school absence is, in effect, a value statement that whatever the child would have achieved in school that day was less important or beneficial than the alternative planned for the absence day. Expressions such as 'doonah days' or 'mental health' days appear widely understood in the community, implying a level of acceptance of unscheduled absences.

Possible motivations for keeping a child home with a parent included
- Parents being anxious about their child when at school
- A public demonstration of affection for the child
- Assuage parent guilt over family stress/ breakdown
- Attempt to make the child feel privileged, indulged or special

- Demonstration of non-conformist ideology

## COLLECTIVE ACTIONS TO INCREASE ATTENDANCE

Suggestions for action contributed by summit participants could be summarized as an overall statement of purpose or goal, with twelve distinct objectives as follows:

*To adopt a whole of community approach to developing and implementing attendance strategies that will see Mount Alexander Shire schools rank in the (top tenth percentile) in the state for attendance.*

We will do this by

- Building community awareness
- Developing shared values
- Understanding the underlying causes of absenteeism
- Sharing information on successful strategies
- Being mindful of the influence of curriculum content and delivery
- Improving data collection and monitoring
- Partnership building & community engagement for collective impact
- Working with individual students and families
- Developing specific resources and services to address absenteeism
- Seeking additional support and professional development for school staff
- Celebrating and rewarding high attendance
- Continuously evaluating and improving strategies

Specific suggestions relating to each of the major objectives follow, and incorporate immediate and longer term actions; community, home and school based domains and actions that are either achievable with current resources or require redeployed/ additional funding.

*Building community awareness of issues relating to absence from school*

- Promote understanding of absenteeism (issues and impacts) at parent forums, assemblies, meetings, on social media sites
- Share solid, well collected data with community to show the problem is real
- Share 'first power point' (presented at current summit) with school councils
- Promote student mentors/good role models for regular attendance
- Regular features in newspaper and school newsletters about attendance
- Share information for newsletters and websites between schools for consistent message
- Posters around schools on impact of non- attendance
- Discuss every day matters with friends and community
- Encourage understanding re complexity of some young people's lives (less blaming, more compassion)
- Public art installations to raise awareness
- 'Compulsory' workshops for parents when unexplained absences get to10 per year
- Continue 'not ok to be away' campaign
- Engage a 'big note' speaker e.g. Michael Carr-Greg, Michael Gross (and televise)
- Article for councillor bulletin

*Developing shared values/changing culture and beliefs on the importance of education and regular attendance*

- Talk to junior football, netball league for assistance with attendance at school
- Challenge acceptance of absenteeism
- Cultural change across community on attendance
- Speak about it (school attendance) next sermon (church)
- Send my child to school even when they are reluctant and telling other families about it
- Don't congratulate kids out of school, commiserate
- Welcome letter to new VCAL students with advice on consequences of absenteeism
- Officially celebrate 'special days' assigned to weekends
- Community charter to commit to shared actions
- Negotiate agreed values with community on absenteeism
- School attendance to be part of the Castlemaine Accord
- Promote importance of special days at school and the follow up activities

*Understanding and addressing underlying causes of absenteeism*

- Every school to have a designated social worker/welfare person/outreach person to support children and families where attendance is poor
- Breakfast club to get more kids and parents to school
- Talk to kids and parents to better understand poor attendance rates
- Address underlying causes collaboratively- with community, service sector
- Student discussion on friendships and links to attendance
- Encourage understanding regarding complexity of some young people's lives
- School visits by health practitioners for assessments in optical/dental etc.
- Ask local health service providers to set aside after school appointment times for school kids

- School walking bus involving community

## *Sharing of information on best practice strategies to tackle absenteeism*

- Adopt practices from schools with best attendance rates
- Use Central Vic Primary Care Partnership website to share data and strategies
- Subscribe to 'parenting ideas' http://www.parentingideasschools.com.au/
- Write articles on successful strategies

## *Influence of Curriculum and Pedagogy*

It was recognized that engagement with the curriculum is a factor which influences attendance for some students. Key strategies to focus on in this area included:
- Lesson differentiation to cater for needs of all students
- Individual Learning Plans to be reviewed regularly with teachers, parents
- Implement Indigenous studies as part of AusVELS to increase Koori Attendance
- Indigenous homework club

*Improving data collection and monitoring*

Common themes emerging in this domain centred on reviewing current methods of recording attendance and implementing common strategies across schools to record absence data to inform strategy development. More specific suggestions included:

- Keeping an attendance diary to follow up individual students each day
- Tracking home school numbers and outcomes
- Report on withdrawal rates from VCAL
- Change the way socio economic status is calculated
- Look for patterns in absences for individual students
- Convene another summit in 12 months to compare data between schools

*Working with Individual students/families*

Suggestions made in this domain revolved around the need to track individual students' attendance, identify (as early as possible) emerging attendance issues and ideally, identify the underlying cause/s of poor attendance and recommend resources to help. Consistency of support resources and approach (within and across schools) was seen as important, possibly as an equity issue.

*Partnership building and community engagement for collective impact*

- Build collaborative relationships between teacher and parent
- Park Max Lesser's bus near Victory Park to engage students out of school
- Invite business clubs and wider community to support our kids
- Ask the kids for ideas to improve attendance
- Feedback from students on attendance strategies
- Community charter to commit to shared actions
- Shire-wide campaign about 'every day counts'
- Planning group with all sectors represented to develop strategy and seek funding opportunities

- Parent tours during school time
- Work on a 'collective impact' model
- Businesses encouraged to challenge kids out of school
- Encourage local community to ask young people out of school if they need help to improve attendance and suggest referral options
- Neighbourhood and friends to support families to get kids to school
- Each school analyses its community and family services referral system to ensure up to date knowledge of services available

*Developing resources and services to address absenteeism*

- Free parenting support group sessions
- Keep in touch with community support agencies for awareness of available supports
- Develop a multiple strategies 'checklist' for difficult to engage families
- Script for staff re absenteeism, highlight importance of personal commitment
- Scripts for addressing identified barriers to attendance
- Subscribe to 'parenting ideas' website
- A staff member in each school for wellbeing i.e. a 'school mum or dad'
- Continue role of PACE coordinator
- Totally free education
- Seek budget allocation from DEECD to address attendance
- Capacity to visit (outreach) to families of disengaged students

*Support and professional development for school staff*

- Every school to have a designated social worker/welfare person/outreach person to support teachers, children and families
- Increase teacher awareness of signs of neglect and abuse and action i.e. refer to Child First to help assess potential risks to child
- Form a case /peer support group for principals where multiple strategies have not worked
- 'Bridge Out of Poverty' workshop for all teachers

*Celebrating and rewarding high attendance*

- Invite Koorie high achiever to talk & award
- Report successes of attendance strategies to parents
- Celebrate local achievements annually
- Build on success strategies e.g. wristband rewards for regular attendance
- Inter-School Competition and party for school with best attendance rate
- End of term rewards at school assemblies
- Support the Meeting Place, take all kids to Torres Strait, rewards for attendance
- 'Come along cup' and mascot strategy
- Class rewards for attendance e.g. pyjama party
- Seek business sponsorship to reward attendance

*Continuously evaluating and improving strategies*

- Hold another (similar) summit to evaluate progress, share new research and strategies that work

# APPENDIX 1

# SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS ON ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

## Mary Anne Rooney Principal Winters Flat Primary School: Report on visit to Birmingham U.K.

I visited Birmingham as part of my 'High Performing Principal' study tour, to look at the programs and approaches that the Local Education Authority (LEA) and Welfare Department use to successfully tackle the high absenteeism rates in the city. These approaches turned Birmingham's data from one of the worst in the country to be one of the best. Basically, the approach is a whole of city effort. Children do not attend school for many reasons, therefore there needs to be many strategies to address the issues.

*Cool Cats*
For young children – the concept is that Cool Cat is a Superhero who helps children who don't want to go to school. Sets of readers, a big book, toys, stickers and other incentives are used as part of the program. Cool cat says "It's cool to go to school". Discussions can be held based on the issues brought out by the books and children are supported to attend school.

*Social workers*
A school attendance vehicle is used to patrol streets, complete with social workers who stop and question school age children not at school. If required, police cab assist to return the child to school.

*Regular attendance reports*
There are sent home with children, indicating the attendance rates of children.

*Community involvement*
The local shopping centre works with the LEA to support the strategy. Posters are displayed; hairdressers, dentists etc. are strongly encourage to make appointment for children outside school hours. Tourist bureau offers discounted holidays for parents who take trips in school holidays.
Parenting courses are held, enforceable by law for parents of children who regularly truant.

*A special program for year 9 students with poor attendance records.*
This is aimed at making the "real world' real – working on their aspirations and inviting guests in to explore the reality of their preferred jobs e.g. hairdressing – you need to be a regular attendee at school because the school could be asked to give a reference for you.

## Jo Wedgwood and Cath Butler, Connect Central Castlemaine: The 'Reengage' Project for Youth 2014 :

The reengage project and report attempts to understand the relative contributions of a wide set of circumstances, beliefs and attitudes affecting the likelihood that a young person will disengage from education before attaining the highest year level possible for them.

Connect Central Castlemaine (CCC) is a partnership of key education, community, health, welfare and youth sector organisations in Mount Alexander Shire, formed with the vision of empowering our most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people to take control and shape their futures.

CCC undertook to survey students in 2011 and again in 2014 to benchmark changes that may have occurred over the three year period in response to targeted interventions and to expand the study for a deeper analysis of issues that emerged in 2011. Critically, in the 2014 project, the definition of disengagement incorporate measures of participation and interest in school activities, as well as attendance to better reflect the reality that even young people who attend school regularly have varying degrees of engagement.

Responses to statements in the 2014 survey are discussed under thirteen subheadings, and consider the statistical significance of their relationship with engagement; average group responses and differences based on participant recruitment group, age and gender.

The greatest difference in 2014 between well engaged students and their disengaged peers can be summarised as
- Experiencing 'a lot of stress ' in the family
- Alcohol consumption
- Feeling misunderstood
- Poor mental health,
- Reduced levels of family support

Many significant findings have results in the 50 recommendations. Areas of highest priority to Connect Central Castlemaine  include the following:
- Mental wellbeing
- Family Stress
- Family support and home environment
- Substance abuse
- School environment and system

A full copy of the report can be obtained from the Castlemaine District Community Health website www.cdchcastlemaine.com.au.

# Summary of Reengage Recommendations

## Mental well being
1.  Promote mental wellbeing programs from Year 7 at Secondary level and investigate the linking of vulnerable young people in transition from Primary to Secondary Schools with supportive mental wellbeing programs
2.  Continue to strengthen links between school wellbeing staff, community health, mental health services etc.
3.  Increase accessibility of mental health outreach to young people who are disconnected
4.  Provide programs in Secondary College which include Stress management and relaxation techniques ;Sleep Hygiene and Body Image. Where possible disseminate information on the above to parents
5.  Build community and parental capacity to understand the perspectives of young people
6.  Ensure pathways to identify and report abuse are safe and accessible to young people

## Quality of relationships with teachers

7.  Build the capacity of secondary school staff to identify and support students experiencing stress.
8.  Investigate how Primary to Secondary transition programs can further support identified vulnerable young people in engagement with school

## Family Stress
9.  Explore safety nets for young people experiencing police involvement with the family.
10. Increase engagement with families of vulnerable young people and Improve access to family mediation
11. Increase access and strengthen pathways to family support, young carer support, St Luke's and 'Reconnect'

## Family Support and home environment (P)
12. Consider a campaign that focuses on increasing parental understanding of the variety of ways they can contribute to maintain their child's engagement and performance in education
13. Build on successes of current peer support programs and Youth Mentoring Network
14. Increase school and community awareness of indicators of abuse, and how to respond to suspected child abuse and neglect or not feeling safe at home.  Specific resources eg: Bursting the Bubble brochures.
15. Publicise websites that help young people identify personal safety protective factors:
16. CCC to work with CSC on considering additional parent support speakers or programs at appropriate events

## Socio economic stress
17. Youth Response Team to review available access to brokerage options available in the Shire
18. CSC to explore ways to help families with paperwork if required, to access school financial support options

## Satisfaction with curriculum
19. Continue to support CSC with  the FLO program and enhance curriculum in line with student aspirations
20. Promote the 'real world' and 'hands on learning' approach with FLO and mainstream students*.*

## Attention, concentration and behavioural issues
21. Increase support in schools for early identification and intervention for students with attention deficits
22. Consult parent groups to analyse whether sufficient support and information is available on appropriate balance between technology based and other activities for their children.
23. Continue to support of "calmer classrooms' approach with teachers

## Substance use (P)
24. Continue drug and alcohol education programs in schools, seeking input from parents, health promotion agencies and community groups
25. Examine current community health messaging around alcohol consumption

26 Support youth outreach in Victory Park and examine how this will need support post Youth Connections ceasing in December, 2014.

27 CCC to advocate for youth worker in MAS due to loosing Youth Connections and Youth AOD position.

28 CCC to promote AOD services to young people and families.

## General motivation/goal directedness

29 Communicate results of this survey to teachers, students, parents and the community. Assist with learning styles that promote engagement.

30 Where students find learning difficult, encourage the use of the Youth Mentoring Network.

31 Feedback positive findings on aspiration to the students in the FLO group.

32 Encourage and motivate students to remain in education to Year 12 through school programs

33 Investigate how transition programs can assist vulnerable young people in the transition to Year 7.

## Preferences around seeking advice

34 Ensure students are aware of available options for counselling

35 Emphasize and support confidentiality arrangements to promote confidence to seek adult assistance.

36 Build capacity of peer support groups at school

37 Promote access to youth friendly GPs.

38 CCC to continue to promote a broad range of support access for vulnerable young people eg: outreach

## School environment & systems (P)

39 Encourage disengaging students to participate in student consultative processes

40 Assess potential gaps in availability of extra academic supports

41 Continue to engage students in creative planning to enhance engagement in schooling

42 Aim to identify students earlier who have a sense of not coping with problems in their life or 'falling further behind every year' and assisting the student with an education and personal plan for support

## Peers relationships

43 Continue support for successful anti-bullying strategies

44 Promote strategies for student to feel safe to report anti-social behaviour

45 Refer the issue of not feeling safe at school to student consultative groups for further investigation:

46 CSC to use restorative practice where possible with students

47 CCC to assess how to best continue support of 'Respectful Relationships' program

## Additional recommendations

48 Investigate how students can celebrate diversity as a positive way of social inclusion

49 Where identified consult with students and families on how best to support a young person with a disability

50 Consult with students and families where transport has been identified as an issue for school engagement

**Margaret Bainbridge:**

**Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts**
Highlights from A study conducted by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Centre for Child Health Research, University of Western Australia 2013

This report documented the findings of a detailed study of the relationship between attendance at school and student outcomes. The study was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) in 2012, and conducted by The University of Western Australia (Centre for Child Health Research, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research).The primary aims of the study were to assess patterns of attendance over time, how these patterns vary across schools and students with different characteristics, and how these patterns of attendance contribute to student outcomes

The research team examined attendance and absence using three main measures attendance rate; authorised absence rate and unauthorised absence rate. They used NAPLAN scores in the numeracy, reading and writing domains to assess student achievement.

## KEY FINDINGS

*Children have highly stable attendance throughout the primary years.*

- Attendance rates fall in secondary school
- Attendance rates were high in each year of primary school (around 92%),
- Individual students generally had a similar level of attendance from year to year.
- Attendance rates among all student subgroups declined markedly from the first year of secondary schooling
- Relative disadvantage was unequivocally associated with poorer attendance, from the very beginning of formal schooling.
- Students in schools with a lower Socio Economic Index (SEI), Aboriginal students, students who were highly mobile and those whose parents had lower levels of education and occupational status, all had lower levels of attendance, on average.
- The effects of absence accumulate over time.

*Reducing unauthorised absences should be the key focus of attendance strategies*
Unauthorised absences had a significantly stronger association with achievement than authorised absences, reflecting that more than just time away from school, but also possibly behavioural and school engagement issues are involved

*Some students are more adversely affected by absence than others.*
More advantaged children had relatively high achievement levels irrespective of their level of attendance at school, suggesting that more advantaged children have alternative and effective resources that help them

- Disadvantaged students achieved at significantly lower levels at Year 3, and these achievement gaps remained in place throughout the school years.
- Improvements in absence rates over time, particularly for unauthorised absences, protected students from falling further behind
- Low achieving students had a propensity for poor attendance in later years even when their initial attendance was good.

*Encourage parents and provide support through schools to help students catch up after missing school*

The full report is available at http://www.telethonkids.org.au/media/472779/final_report_2013.pdf