

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Education and Manpower Bureau**

<h3><b>Student attendance in public schools</b></h3>
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**Audit Commission  
Hong Kong  
28 March 2007**

*This audit review was carried out under a set of guidelines tabled in the Provisional Legislative Council by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee on 11 February 1998. The guidelines were agreed between the Public Accounts Committee and the Director of Audit and accepted by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.*

Report No. 48 of the Director of Audit contains 8 Chapters which are available on our website at <http://www.aud.gov.hk>.

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# STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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## **PART 1: INTRODUCTION**

1.1 This PART describes the background to the audit and outlines its objective and scope.

### **Free and universal basic education**

1.2 In Hong Kong, the Government provides 9-year free and universal basic education beginning at the age of 6. This policy has been in force since 1978 and is enforced by the Government through legislation (i.e. section 74 of the Education Ordinance (Cap. 279)).

1.3 Primary and secondary school places are provided by aided schools managed by voluntary bodies under the Code of Aid, by government schools managed directly by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), and by private schools. In the 2005/06 school year (unless otherwise specified, all years mentioned hereinafter refer to school years which commence on the first day of September), there were 374,000 students in government and aided primary schools (hereinafter referred to as public primary schools) and 414,000 students in government and aided secondary schools (hereinafter referred to as public secondary schools), making a total of 788,000 students.

### **Importance of regular school attendance**

1.4 Regular school attendance is a critical factor for student success. For learning to take place, students have to be at school, in class and paying attention. Students who regularly miss school also miss valuable opportunities for education that often cannot be regained. According to a UK research report, children who are regularly absent from school are more easily drawn into crime and anti-social behaviour, much more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications, more likely to be out of work after leaving school, and more likely to become homeless (Note 1). Research in Australia has similar findings (Note 2). High absence rates can also disrupt a teacher's ability to plan and present class work in an organised way. This can affect the progress of all students in the class, and make the class difficult to manage.

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**Note 1:** *Social Exclusion Unit, Cabinet Office, Truancy and School Exclusion Report, UK, 1998.*

**Note 2:** *House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Truancy and Exclusion from School, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1996.*

## **Improving student attendance is a major challenge**

1.5 Taxpayers meet the cost of education in public schools (\$10,366 million for primary schools and \$16,519 million for secondary schools in the financial year 2005-06). Student absence represents a real loss to society in terms of the cost of teaching, facilities and other resources provided to schools. This does not include other costs to society such as the future costs of having a less educated population. It is not possible to reduce absence to zero or near zero because there are always times when some students cannot attend school (e.g. when they are ill). At present, the EMB does not require schools to report daily attendance for the compilation of the overall student absence rate. Instead, the EMB requires schools to report non-attendance cases on the seventh day of a student's continuous absence in order to focus its efforts in monitoring the reporting of suspected dropouts.

## **Role of Education and Manpower Bureau in improving student attendance**

1.6 The EMB is responsible for formulating and reviewing education policy, securing funds in the government budget, and overseeing the effective implementation of educational programmes. The Secretary for Education and Manpower formulates and implements educational policies at kindergarten, primary and secondary levels. The EMB's main responsibilities include the provision and allocation of public sector school places, assurance of school education quality, monitoring of teaching standards and giving support to schools with public funding and other facilities. An organisation chart (extract) of the EMB as at 31 December 2006 is at Appendix A.

1.7 To address the problem of non-attendance, the EMB set up a Non-attendance Cases (NAC) Team to deal with suspected dropouts. In 2005/06, about 7,800 suspected dropout cases were reported to the NAC Team. Out of these cases, about 1,400 cases required further action (e.g. counselling and school placement).

## **Role of schools in improving student attendance**

1.8 The school-based management (SBM) initiative of the EMB aims to devolve more responsibilities to schools. They are given greater flexibility, autonomy and accountability in the management and use of resources, and development of school programmes. Schools need to be accountable to the Government for the effective use of public funds and to parents and students for the quality of the education they provide. Under the initiative, schools are still part of the education system and operate within the centrally determined framework of authorities and responsibilities. They are responsible for promoting student attendance, preventing students from dropping out of school, and reporting suspected dropout cases to the EMB promptly. To help schools discharge their responsibilities, the EMB issued a School Administration Guide in 2001, which is updated regularly. The Guide sets out, among other things, guidelines on student attendance matters.



## Audit survey

1.9 In order to collate data and information on student attendance practices, the Audit Commission (Audit) conducted a questionnaire survey on schools, students, parents and selected non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and visited some schools. The methodology and response rates of the questionnaire survey are shown in Appendix B. In the survey, Audit analysed the attendance records of 482,000 students of 623 schools. These students accounted for 61% of the total number of public primary and secondary school students.

1.10 *Attendance in schools.* Audit found that, in terms of student attendance in these 623 schools in 2005/06:

- (a) about 151,000 students did not take any leave in 2005/06;
- (b) the average attendance rate (Note 3) was 98.3%, ranging from 91.3% to 99.7%;
- (c) the overall absence rate was 3.2 days per student (2.8 days per primary student and 3.6 days per secondary student) (Note 4);
- (d) 331,000 (69%) students took leave (including unauthorised absence). In total, they took 1,554,000 days of leave, with an overall absence rate of 4.7 days per student (4 days for primary students and 5.3 days for secondary students); and
- (e) among the 18 school nets, there were differences in student attendance rates (see Appendix C). Attendance rates in schools within the same school net also showed variations (see Appendix D).

1.11 While the overall absence rate was not high, there is room for improving student attendance in some schools. Against this background, Audit conducted a review of student attendance in public schools.

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**Note 3:** *In this audit report, the definition for student attendance follows that of the EMB. It is defined as:*

$$\left( 1 - \frac{\text{Total number of absence for the school year}}{\text{Total enrolment} \times \text{Total number of roll calls in the school year}} \right) \times 100\%$$

**Note 4:** *As records of unauthorised absence in schools are generally not available, the absence rate includes both authorised absence (e.g. illness) and unauthorised absence. According to the EMB, the attendance information is only one of the indicators relating to students' learning and that such information should be read within context and together with other data of the schools concerned.*

### **Audit objective and scope**

1.12 The objective of this audit is to examine the effectiveness of the EMB and public primary and secondary schools in improving student attendance, with a view to identifying areas for improvement. Special schools which provide education for students with special education needs are not covered in this review.

1.13 This audit covers the following areas:

- (a) improving student attendance by the EMB (PART 2);
- (b) provision of guidance and support to schools by the EMB (PART 3);
- (c) improving student attendance by schools (PART 4); and
- (d) recording and reporting of student attendance (PART 5).

### **Overall audit conclusion**

1.14 In September 2006, Audit invited the EMB to comment on the draft questionnaires, which were subsequently used for the questionnaire survey conducted in late 2006. On 27 October 2006, the EMB issued a Circular (No. 11/2006), which superseded Circular No. 31/2003, on upholding students' right to education. (The EMB Circular No. 31/2003 was on the enforcement of universal basic education and was issued on 30 October 2003.) Audit welcomes the prompt action by the EMB to improve student attendance. In considering the audit findings and making the recommendations, Audit has taken into account the provisions of this latest circular.

1.15 Audit has found that the EMB and schools have taken continuous action to improve student attendance. Audit supports their efforts, but notes that there are still areas where further improvement can be made. In particular, concerted efforts by various stakeholders can make a difference in reducing truancy and improving student attendance.

### **General response from the Administration**

1.16 The **Secretary for Education and Manpower** fully appreciates the efforts of Audit in conducting this study and making recommendations to improve the student attendance in public schools. He will consider these recommendations and take follow-up actions as appropriate. He has said that:

- (a) the EMB is committed to upholding students' right to education. The Government provides 9-year free and universal basic education to children aged

between 6 and 15. For students aged 15 or above, it is also the EMB's policy that those who are capable and willing to pursue further studies after Secondary Three (S3) should be provided with such opportunities. By 2009/10 when the new academic structure for senior secondary education is implemented, all students should, under normal circumstances, be able to complete six years of secondary education;

- (b) under the EMB Circular No. 11/2006 (see para. 1.14), schools are reminded to put in place measures for assuring students' regular attendance and to follow strictly the requirements of reporting to the EMB all student dropouts and departures, regardless of their age and class level;
- (c) to enable its monitoring and sizing of the magnitude of the student dropout issue, all along the EMB requires schools to report suspected dropout cases. The cases are handled by the NAC Team of the EMB. At the school level, schools are implementing both preventive and remedial measures for handling student dropout problem under the SBM framework;
- (d) to effectively tackle the complex student dropout problem, the EMB welcomes Audit's recommendations regarding the reinforcement of collaboration among different stakeholders, including the EMB, the Social Welfare Department (SWD), schools, school social workers (SSWs), parents and NGOs; and
- (e) with the concerted efforts of schools, parents, NGOs and the relevant government departments, the EMB is determined to work towards the objectives of further reducing student dropout/truancy cases, and helping dropouts to reintegrate into normal school life in the light of Audit's recommendations.

## **Acknowledgement**

1.17 Audit would like to acknowledge with gratitude:

- (a) the full cooperation of staff of the EMB during the audit;
- (b) the full cooperation of heads of school, teachers, student guidance staff, SSWs, students and students' parents of public primary and secondary schools, and staff of NGOs during the audit and their time and effort in completing the audit questionnaires; and
- (c) the constructive advice and comments provided by the academic staff of the Faculty of Education of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Centre for Child Development of the Hong Kong Baptist University on the subject and, in particular, on the design of the audit questionnaires and the audit survey.

## **PART 2: IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE BY THE EDUCATION AND MANPOWER BUREAU**

2.1 This PART examines the EMB's effort in improving student attendance and notes that there is room for the EMB to speed up processing of suspected dropout cases.

### **EMB's efforts in tackling school dropout problem**

2.2 In 2000, in its proposals for reforming the education system in Hong Kong, the Education Commission (Note 5) stated that the education system "should not give up on any single student, but rather let all students have the chance to develop their potential". In overseas countries such as the US and the UK, high priority is attached to dealing with student absence.

#### *Causes for student absence*

2.3 Of the 797 heads of school (9 did not respond to this question) who responded to the question about the causes for student absence, 778 (98%) stated that illness was the most significant cause for student absence. Nineteen (2%) heads of school considered that other reasons such as medical appointments, family holidays and unauthorised absence were the most significant causes for student absence.

#### *Mechanism to identify suspected dropout students*

2.4 The EMB identifies suspected dropout students through the following sources:

- (a) **Reports from schools.** Prior to 27 October 2006, schools had to urgently report to the NAC Team of the EMB (see para. 2.5) if a student, who was aged between 6 and 15 and had not yet completed S3, was continuously absent for seven days and the reason for absence was associated with behavioural, emotional and family problems, academic difficulties, truancy, losing interest in studies or being withheld by parents from attending school (EMB Circular No. 31/2003 of 30 October 2003 refers). With effect from 27 October 2006, schools have to report to the NAC Team **without delay** all students, regardless of their age and class level, who are continuously absent for seven days for whatever reasons (EMB Circular No. 11/2006 refers);

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**Note 5:** *In the 2000 Policy Address, the Government stated that it had adopted the Education Commission's recommendations contained in the Commission's "Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong" of September 2000.*

- (b) **Annual enrolment surveys.** The School Places Allocation (SPA) Section conducts an enrolment survey in mid-September each year to provide updated enrolment situation for Primary One (P1) to S7. After collecting survey results from schools, the SPA Section verifies the accuracy of the data. Based on the verified data, the NAC Team identifies students who have not enrolled in P1 and S1 as suspected dropout students;
- (c) **School transfers reported by schools.** Heads of school identify and report school transfers to the SPA Section. Based on these reported cases, students who were not subsequently admitted by other schools are identified. The NAC Team will follow up these cases as suspected dropout cases; and
- (d) **Reports from other parties.** Other parties may identify and report cases of student absence to the NAC Team. These parties include parents/guardians of students, students themselves, the Hong Kong Police Force, the SWD and NGOs.

#### ***Non-attendance Cases Team***

2.5 The NAC Team is tasked to deal with suspected dropout students reported with the aim to assist students go back to school at the earliest and possible convenience. Upon notification of suspected dropout cases, the NAC Team has to identify and open files for the cases which require action. The Team also has to provide/coordinate counselling and support services, arrange placement programmes and find suitable schools to enable dropout students to eventually return to normal school life. Professional assistance from other sources such as the service of educational psychologists (EPs) and family social workers will be sought when and where appropriate. The NAC Team may also refer cases to the Internal Review Board (IRB — Note 6) for consideration of issuing attendance orders. The Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower may, on the recommendation of the IRB, issue an attendance order (Note 7).

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**Note 6:** *The IRB is chaired by the Chief School Development Officer of the Careers Guidance and Home-School Cooperation Section with four School Development Officers, and an EP as regular members. The IRB is responsible for examining difficult dropout cases and considering issuing attendance orders under the Education Ordinance.*

**Note 7:** *Under section 74 of the Education Ordinance, the Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower may serve upon a parent of a student an attendance order requiring him to cause the student to attend regularly as a student in the primary school or secondary school named in the order. Under section 78 of the Ordinance, any parent who fails to comply with an attendance order shall be liable on conviction to a fine at level 3 (\$10,000) and to imprisonment for 3 months.*

2.6 In 2004/05 and 2005/06, the NAC Team received 19,969 suspected dropout cases and, after preliminary investigations, opened 12,401 suspected dropout case files. Table 1 shows the number of suspected dropout cases received and case files opened, based on information from different sources (see para. 2.4).

**Table 1**  
**Suspected dropout cases received and files opened**  
**in 2004/05 and 2005/06**

Information source	2004/05		2005/06		Total	
	Cases received	Files opened	Cases received	Files opened	Cases received	Files opened
Reports from schools	1,361	727	1,671	1,007	3,032 (15%)	1,734 (14%)
Annual enrolment surveys	1,897	1,897	1,505	1,505	3,402 (17%)	3,402 (28%)
School transfers reported by schools	8,778	4,835	4,606	2,279	13,384 (67%)	7,114 (57%)
Reports from other parties	81	81	70	70	151 (1%)	151 (1%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,117</b>	<b>7,540</b>	<b>7,852</b>	<b>4,861</b>	<b>19,969 (100%)</b>	<b>12,401 (100%)</b>

*Source: EMB records and Audit analysis*

Audit conducted a further analysis of the time taken to deal with the suspected dropout cases based on reports from schools, annual enrolment surveys and school transfers reported by schools. The findings are reported in paragraphs 2.7 to 2.16.

### **Audit observations**

#### *Delay in reporting suspected dropout cases by schools*

2.7 The longer students are out of school, the more difficult it will be for them to reintegrate into school life, and the higher the risk of them becoming a social burden in the longer term. Prompt reporting is therefore of crucial importance in the handling of dropout cases. According to EMB Circular No. 31/2003, schools had to report urgently to the NAC

Team if a student was continuously absent for seven days (see para. 2.4(a)). To investigate if suspected dropout cases were promptly handled by the EMB, Audit examined the time interval between suspected dropouts' last school attendance dates and the corresponding NAC Team case files opening dates for 2004/05 and 2005/06.

2.8 As shown in Table 2, in 2004/05 and 2005/06, 59% of the suspected dropout case files were opened more than 20 days after the students' last school attendance dates, with 78 (4%) cases exceeding 100 days.

**Table 2**  
**Time elapsed before the NAC Team opened case files**  
**for suspected dropout cases reported by schools**

Time elapsed (Number of days)	Number of cases			
	2004/05	2005/06	Total	Percentage
0 to 10	69	99	168	10%
11 to 20	220	312	532	31%
21 to 40	257	329	586	34%
41 to 100	148	222	370	21%
101 to 440	33	45	78	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>1,007</b>	<b>1,734</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: EMB records and Audit analysis*

2.9 Delay in opening case files may render it difficult for the NAC Team to take prompt action to assist dropout students to resume schooling. To ascertain if the delay observed in Table 2 was due to late reporting by schools, Audit further examined a sample of 60 suspected dropout cases (30 cases in 2004/05 and 2005/06 each) that took the longest time for opening of case files. Details are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

**Time elapsed from last school attendance dates  
to school report dates in 60 suspected dropout cases**

Time elapsed (Number of days)	Number of cases			
	2004/05	2005/06	Total	Percentage
0 to 50	0	0	0	0%
51 to 100	3	1	4	7%
101 to 150	14	11	25	42%
151 to 200	6	6	12	20%
201 to 250	3	5	8	13%
over 250	4	7	11	18%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: EMB records and Audit analysis

2.10 In response to Audit’s enquiry, in November 2006, the NAC Team advised that generally it would contact any school which had delayed reporting of suspected dropout cases and urge it to report the cases in a timely manner. **Audit considers that the EMB needs to identify those schools which do not comply with the requirement of reporting suspected dropout cases on time, and remind them to report the cases without delay.**

*Delay in identifying suspected dropout cases from annual enrolment surveys*

2.11 The SPA Section conducts an enrolment survey in mid-September each year in all schools with a view to providing an updated enrolment situation for P1 to S7. Schools are requested to return the survey results to the SPA Section within one week. According to the SPA Section, due to other priorities of work at the beginning of the school term, some schools do not submit the survey returns on time. There are also a considerable number of erroneous enrolment data reported by the schools. As teachers responsible for submitting student information are heavily preoccupied with other school duties during that period, it takes time for the SPA Section to verify, seek clarification from schools and rectify the rejected data. Verification of enrolment data for all levels is completed around November each year when the NAC Team starts to identify suspected dropout cases.



2.12 Audit conducted an analysis of the file opening dates of 3,402 suspected dropout cases identified by the NAC Team, based on verified data from the annual enrolment surveys in 2004/05 and 2005/06 (see Table 1 in para. 2.6). Audit found that 76% of the suspected dropout case files were opened in November, and 24% were opened after November of the relevant school year.

2.13 There is a high risk that some P1 and S1 students become dropouts without being identified as they are not attended to by any school during the summer vacation. Under the current identification mechanism, P1 and S1 dropout students would not be identified until the SPA Section has conducted the enrolment survey and verified the survey results. **Audit considers that the EMB needs to review whether it is feasible to verify first the enrolment data at the P1 and S1 levels.**

*Delay in identifying suspected dropout cases based on school transfers*

2.14 Prior to 27 October 2006, schools had to report to the SPA Section within 14 days of students' absence due to school transfers (EMB Circular No. 31/2003 refers). Suspected dropout cases would be identified when the SPA Section did not receive notification from any school about the enrolment of the students concerned, three weeks after the students' last attendance date. The NAC Team would take follow-up action on these cases. From 27 October 2006, schools are required to report to the EMB within seven days of the students' departure for school transfers (EMB Circular No. 11/2006 refers).

2.15 To ascertain whether suspected dropout case files based on school transfers were opened promptly, Audit analysed the time interval between the dates of students' last attendance and the dates of file opening in 2004/05 and 2005/06. As shown in Table 4 below, 55% of the suspected dropout case files were opened more than 30 days after the date of a student's last school attendance, with 1,300 cases exceeding 100 days.

**Table 4**

**Time interval for opening case files for suspected dropout cases based on school transfers**

Time interval (Number of days)	Number of cases			
	2004/05	2005/06	Total	Percentage
0 to 20	474	400	874	12%
21 to 30	1,941	390	2,331	33%
31 to 60	1,021	564	1,585	22%
61 to 100	798	226	1,024	15%
101 to 670	601	699	1,300	18%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,835</b>	<b>2,279</b>	<b>7,114</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: EMB records and Audit analysis

2.16 In 2004/05 and 2005/06, the NAC Team received 13,384 suspected dropout cases and opened 7,114 suspected dropout case files (see Table 1 in para. 2.6) for students whose school transfers were not subsequently matched with re-admissions in other schools (see para. 2.4(c)). **In view of the large number of school transfers reported by schools which turn out to be suspected dropout cases, Audit considers that the EMB needs to provide more guidance to schools in reporting school transfers so that suspected dropout cases would be reported promptly to the NAC Team.**

***Time-frame for handling suspected dropout cases not strictly followed***

2.17 EMB Circular No. 31/2003 provided a time-frame for handling suspected dropout cases. In essence, the first three months of intervention after the students' absence would be devoted to counselling work by student guidance staff and SSWs. When counselling was not effective in bringing the students back to school, consideration for the issue of warning letters and attendance orders to the parents by the EMB would be initiated on the **fourth and seventh month** of intervention respectively (Note 8). The NAC Team

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**Note 8:** *Under EMB Circular No. 11/2006, the time-frame is reduced. For a suspected dropout case, the EMB will provide counselling service during the first two months and will issue a warning letter at the end of the second month after the reporting of absence. It will issue reminders at the end of the third month and every month thereafter. For continuous non-compliance, the EMB will issue an attendance order at the end of the sixth month.*

would bring up the cases to the IRB which would consider issuing warning letters or attendance orders.

2.18 Audit conducted an analysis on the time used by the NAC Team to complete action on suspected dropout case files opened in 2004/05 and 2005/06. Audit noted that the NAC Team completed action on 12,190 cases. Details are shown in Table 5 below.

**Table 5**

**Time used to complete action on suspected dropout case files opened in 2004/05 and 2005/06 (position as at 30 September 2006)**

<b>Time used to complete the cases</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
≤ 3 months	10,700	88%
> 3 to ≤ 4 months	474	4%
> 4 to ≤ 7 months	663	5%
> 7 months	353	3%
	} 1,016	
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,190</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: EMB records and Audit analysis*

2.19 As shown in Table 5, in 2004/05 and 2005/06, 88% of the 12,190 cases were completed within three months after the opening of case files. No warning letter or attendance order was required for these cases (see para. 2.17). Audit noted that 1,016 cases took more than four months to complete, 353 cases of which were completed more than seven months after the file opening dates. According to the time-frame for handling suspected dropout cases, the NAC Team should have brought up these cases to the IRB which would consider issuing warning letters or attendance orders (see para. 2.17). However, up to 30 September 2006, of all case files opened in 2004/05 and 2005/06, only 12 cases were brought up to the IRB, six warning letters were issued for four cases and no attendance order was issued.

2.20 **Audit considers that the NAC Team needs to adhere to the stipulated time-frame in taking follow-up action to assist dropouts to resume schooling as soon as possible.**

### ***Manpower requirement of NAC Team***

2.21 As at 31 December 2006, the NAC Team, headed by a School Development Officer (SDO), comprised 20 staff (1 SDO, 13 Student Guidance Officers (SGOs) and 6 clerical officers). The NAC Team has to deal with a large number of suspected dropout cases, including opening of case files, and performing follow-up actions (e.g. counselling). As shown in Table 1 in paragraph 2.6, in 2005/06, 4,861 case files were opened on suspected dropout students. Because of the educational benefits to these students, earlier action is in their interest. **The EMB needs to examine the caseload of the NAC Team and consider taking necessary improvement measures.**

### **Audit recommendations**

2.22 **Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should:**

- (a) **identify those schools which do not comply with the requirement of reporting suspected dropout cases on time, and remind them to report the cases without delay (see para. 2.10);**
- (b) **consider whether it is feasible for the SPA Section to verify first the P1 and S1 enrolment data in the annual enrolment survey so that the NAC Team can identify suspected dropout cases at these two levels sooner (see para. 2.13);**
- (c) **provide more guidance to schools in reporting school transfers so that suspected dropout cases would be reported promptly to the NAC Team (see para. 2.16);**
- (d) **ensure that the NAC Team adheres to the stipulated time-frame in taking action (e.g. issuing of warning letters and reminders) to assist dropouts to resume schooling as soon as possible (see para. 2.20); and**
- (e) **examine the caseload of the NAC Team and consider taking necessary improvement measures (see para. 2.21).**

### **Response from the Administration**

2.23 The **Secretary for Education and Manpower** generally agrees with the audit recommendations and will take follow-up actions as recommended. He has said that to facilitate dropouts' reintegration into normal school life, the EMB will strengthen its collaboration with schools and other parties, including the SWD that is overseeing the NGOs which provide SSW services in secondary schools.

### **PART 3: PROVISION OF GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT TO SCHOOLS BY THE EDUCATION AND MANPOWER BUREAU**

3.1 This PART examines the provision of guidance and support to public schools by the EMB with a view to identifying areas for improvement.

#### **EMB's support to schools to tackle the problem of truancy**

3.2 The EMB considers the truancy problem an acting out behaviour of students who have encountered school adjustment problems, such as poor relationship with peers and teachers, and learning difficulties. Other factors such as family problems, addictive computer games and Internet activities and bad peer influence also aggravate the truancy problem. Therefore, the EMB's approach in preventing the truancy problem lies in helping the students to adjust to normal school life, develop health-life habits and cope with adverse family environment.

3.3 The EMB has implemented various measures facilitating schools to create a caring and accepting learning environment and to address the whole-person development of students so as to reduce their behavioural problems at school, including truancy. The measures include issuing EMB circulars to schools reminding them of the importance of preventing students from dropping out of school, giving resources to schools to provide student guidance services and implementing projects to assist students to improve self-discipline (see Appendix E).

#### **Audit observations**

##### ***Increasing concern of the problem of truancy in schools***

3.4 The EMB conducts an annual survey on guidance and discipline cases handled by schools. Schools are requested to report to the EMB the guidance and discipline cases that require follow-up actions or involve working with the parents/guardians. The data are used in the planning of support services for schools in the domain of guidance and discipline.

3.5 As shown in Appendix F, EMB survey results from 2000/01 to 2004/05 indicated that the total number of habitual truancy/non-attendance cases in primary and secondary schools accounted for about 7% of the total number of guidance and discipline cases reported. The problem caused greater concern in secondary schools, where the number of habitual truancy/non-attendance cases accounted for over 8% of the total cases reported. In primary schools, the number of habitual truancy/non-attendance cases was about 2% of the total cases reported.

3.6 In 2005/06, the EMB changed the survey approach and collected case data of the top five guidance and discipline problems from individual schools. The total number of habitual truancy/non-attendance cases reported was over 2,000 and accounted for over 10% of the total cases reported (see Appendix F). For secondary schools, “habitual truancy/non-attendance” ranked second (after “disruptive behaviour in school”) in terms of the total number of cases reported by schools (Note 9), and accounted for over 13% of the total cases reported.

3.7 The survey results indicated that habitual truancy/non-attendance problem had caused increasing concern to some schools, especially for secondary schools. **Audit considers that the EMB may need to strengthen the support measures in tackling habitual truancy problem. The EMB may also need to provide additional support to schools in which truancy is one of the common guidance and discipline problems.**

#### *Provision of guidance to schools*

3.8 In the audit questionnaire survey, heads of school were asked whether they would welcome further guidance from the EMB on how to tackle truancy and improve attendance. Of the 790 heads of school (16 did not respond to this question) who responded to this question, 553 (70%) would like to have further guidance on classification of leave, dealing with difficult parental practice and examples of good practices. The results are shown in Table 6 below.

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**Note 9:** *The ranking of the top five guidance and discipline problems reported by secondary schools, in terms of the number of cases, is disruptive behaviour in school, habitual truancy/non-attendance, unmotivated towards learning, problems in family relationship and inadequate social skills in relating with others.*

Table 6

**Further guidance which the  
553 schools wished the EMB to provide**

Area of guidance (Note)	Number of schools	Percentage of schools
Classification of leave (e.g. the circumstances under which absence was to be classified as unauthorised)	215	39%
Dealing with difficult parental practice	449	81%
Examples of good practices	393	71%

*Source: Audit questionnaire survey*

*Note: Some schools indicated that they wished to have further guidance on more than one aspect.*

**3.9 Audit considers that the EMB may need to provide assistance to schools which wish to have further guidance to improve their student attendance.**

***EMB's support provided to schools for student guidance and educational psychology service***

3.10 ***Student guidance service.*** For primary schools, the EMB provides resources for the implementation of student guidance service. Before 2006/07, the manning ratio of the student guidance staff was one for each primary school with 24 classes or more, or 0.5 for each primary school with 5 to 23 classes. In 2006/07, the EMB further improved the ratio to one to each primary school with 18 classes or more, or 0.5 for each primary school with 5 to 17 classes. For primary schools with 4 classes or less, they are served by the SGOs from the EMB.

3.11 In secondary schools, guidance teachers are responsible for providing guidance service to students. They are supported by SSWs of the NGOs commissioned by the SWD for providing school social work service. With the implementation of the policy of "one SSW for each secondary school" by the SWD in 2000/01, every secondary school is provided with one full-time SSW to identify and help students with academic, social or emotional problems. The SWD also implements initiatives, in collaboration with the EMB, other government bureaux/departments and NGOs, to serve the needs of the youth (see Appendix G).

3.12 ***Educational psychology service.*** The EMB provides school-based educational psychology service for schools. Such service covers assessment service for students, consultation support and professional development for teachers, as well as consultation to schools concerning policy and mechanism to address student diversity. In 2006/07, apart from those schools that are receiving educational psychology service provided by the EMB, 128 primary schools and 133 secondary schools are receiving such service provided by school sponsoring bodies or NGOs under various schemes and projects of the EMB.

3.13 ***Need for EMB's support on student attendance.*** As mentioned in paragraphs 3.10 to 3.12, the EMB has provided services to schools on student guidance and counselling as a whole. The EMB has also implemented several projects to assist students to improve self-discipline and reduce truancy (see Appendix E). However, Audit notes that there is no readily available information about the measures taken by the EMB to help schools improve student attendance. **Audit considers that the EMB needs to provide support to those schools with relatively low attendance rates. Also, the EMB needs to consider drawing up an action plan, with a schedule of implementation, on improving student attendance in the schools concerned, setting out the various measures to be taken to address the problem.**

### **NGOs' assistance to EMB and schools in tackling the problem of school dropouts**

#### ***Project conducted specifically to address the problem of truancy***

3.14 Audit noted that the EMB had conducted a pilot project of foundation courses for marginal dropouts (Note 10) in 2002/03 in secondary schools to address the dropout problem. The project was launched with the intention of testing a proactive measure to retain the marginal dropouts in schools in the light of increasing public concern on non-engaged youth problem. Through a school-based tailor-made curriculum (Note 11), students were expected to have enhanced life skills and improved learning motivation.

3.15 The project (costing about \$1 million) involved 18 participating schools and 287 students. To support the participating schools to provide multifarious learning activities for the target students, the EMB commissioned the Hong Kong Playground Association (HKPA) to conduct school-based enrichment sessions on life skills training from November 2002 to May 2003, including the production of a resource package (see para. 3.17) for dissemination to and use by all secondary schools.

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**Note 10:** *Marginal dropouts refer to junior secondary students who have low learning motivation and high risk of becoming real dropouts.*

**Note 11:** *The school-based tailor-made curriculum contained tailor-made basic academic curriculum, enrichment sessions on life skills training and non-basic learning activities, such as short-term job attachment and voluntary services.*



3.16 Upon the completion of the project, the HKPA conducted an evaluation of the project focusing on the changes of the students' behaviour, attitude and learning performance evolved from the project. Results of the evaluation indicated that, although students had a positive change on habits and social behaviour, there was insignificant change on learning motivation and academic performance. Students needed further improvement on their behaviour, such as attendance and punctuality.

3.17 In March 2004, the EMB distributed the resource package "Unusual Class" produced by the HKPA to schools. The resource package disseminated the experience of running life skills training during formal class periods. According to the EMB, after the pilot project, some schools took the initiative to continue implementing a special teaching programme to cater for students' diversified needs.

#### *Temporary placement programmes for dropouts*

3.18 Apart from directly assisting the potential dropouts, the EMB refers cases to the NGOs which run a number of temporary placement programmes for dropouts from schools to prepare them to return to schools or to take up employment. These include, for example, the Unusual Academy of the HKPA and programmes organised by the LET'S (Life Engagement Training Service) Walk of the Hong Kong Christian Service.

3.19 In parallel with the placement programmes, the NGOs also provide the following services to help improve student attendance and reduce truancy:

- (a) counselling/tutoring students by social workers;
- (b) counselling students' family members by social workers; and
- (c) placement of dropouts back to schools.

3.20 According to a research conducted by the University of Hong Kong in 2001 (Note 12), provision of places in temporary placement programmes was not sufficient for all school dropouts. The research report proposed that schools should make the best use of community-based resources and draw up an overall programme plan in collaboration with the NGOs to address the changing and multifarious needs of students.

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**Note 12:** *A Research on the Needs of Both Potential and Genuine Dropouts, Centre for Educational Leadership of the University of Hong Kong, February 2001.*

## Audit observations

3.21 Schools did not always make good use of the NGOs' services to assist students who had attendance problems. In the audit questionnaire survey, the NGOs were asked to indicate the extent to which schools had made good use of the services. Of the eight NGOs which responded to this question, six (75%) considered that their services were not well used by schools. According to the survey, the lack of adequate support from schools and difficulties in obtaining school places for dropouts had affected the services of most NGOs. Table 7 below shows the results of the audit questionnaire survey.

**Table 7**  
**Difficulties faced by the NGOs**  
**in dealing with student attendance problems**

Difficulty (Note)	NGOs that considered their services were		
	Much affected	Partially affected	Slightly affected
Difficulty in obtaining school places for dropouts	6	1	1
Resource constraints	6	1	—
Lack of adequate support from schools	5	2	1
Lack of adequate support from the EMB	4	2	—
Reluctance of schools to refer students for follow-up action	2	3	2

*Source: Audit questionnaire survey*

*Note: The NGOs were asked to indicate the difficulties they faced in providing services to assist dropouts and to improve student attendance/reduce truancy. Each of the eight NGOs responding to this question, named more than one difficulty.*

3.22 The NGOs informed Audit in the audit questionnaire survey that schools could support their work and the dropouts in the following ways:

- (a) admitting students who graduated from temporary placement programmes of the NGOs;

- (b) taking follow-up action such as updating progress on students after reintegration into normal school life;
- (c) working in partnership with the NGOs in a coordinated manner to address the needs of dropouts from schools; and
- (d) referring cases to the NGOs in a more timely manner.

The NGOs also considered that the EMB could offer similar support by helping the placement of graduates of temporary placement programmes of the NGOs to schools, and formulating an overall programme plan in collaboration with the NGOs to address the needs of dropouts.

3.23 In this connection, Audit noted that about 33% of the schools surveyed said that they had given priority to deal with problems of irregular attendance and dropouts in collaboration with the NGOs (Note 13). In three of the NGOs surveyed, about 20% of the students who are graduates of their placement programmes were not admitted by schools (Note 14). As illustrated by the case in Appendix H, for dropouts who had the ability and intention of returning to school, they should be given the chance to do so.

3.24 **In Audit's view, the EMB needs to take account of the difficulties faced by the NGOs in dealing with attendance problems, and consider stepping up the school placement service for graduates of temporary placement programmes.**

### **Audit recommendations**

3.25 **Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should:**

#### *EMB's support to schools to tackle the problem of truancy*

- (a) **strengthen the support measures in tackling habitual truancy problem (see para. 3.7);**

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**Note 13:** *In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked to indicate the most used improvement measures they had implemented to improve student attendance/reduce truancy. Of the 806 schools surveyed, 269 (33%) heads of school said that they had worked in partnership with the NGOs in this regard.*

**Note 14:** *In the audit questionnaire survey, the NGOs were asked to provide information on the students who had been admitted into the NGOs' temporary placement programmes for reintegrating students into normal school life. According to the responses of three NGOs, the numbers of students admitted into the programmes, graduated from the programmes, and admitted by schools between September 2005 and August 2006 were 225, 188 and 150 respectively. The proportion of students admitted by schools after graduation was 80% (i.e. 150 divided by 188).*

- (b) **provide additional support to schools in which truancy is one of the common guidance and discipline problems (see para. 3.7);**
- (c) **consider providing assistance to those schools which wish to have further guidance on improving their student attendance (see para. 3.9);**
- (d) **provide support to those schools with relatively low attendance rates, and consider drawing up an action plan for improving student attendance in the schools concerned (see para. 3.13); and**

*NGOs' assistance to EMB and schools in tackling the problem of school dropouts*

- (e) **take account of the difficulties faced by the NGOs in dealing with attendance problems, and consider stepping up the school placement service to graduates of temporary placement programmes (see para. 3.24).**

### **Response from the Administration**

3.26 The **Secretary for Education and Manpower** generally agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) students' frequent absence from school and non-attendance for a prolonged period is a manifestation of a range of issues that relate to the schooling and development of the students concerned. The EMB considers that the best way to prevent truancy in schools is for the schools to cultivate a caring and harmonious environment which can facilitate the students' whole person development, in personal, social and academic terms. The EMB will continue to encourage schools to adopt a holistic school-based approach and support them in tackling the problem;
- (b) in particular, the EMB will identify schools with high truancy rate and/or low attendance rate. It will provide these schools with support on guidance and discipline, and give priority to them in relevant programmes such as training camps and the Enhanced Smart Teen Project (see item (B) in Appendix E);
- (c) the EMB will strengthen the collaboration with the SWD which oversees the NGOs in the provision of school social work services in secondary schools; and
- (d) under EMB Circular No. 11/2006 (see para. 1.14), schools with vacancies are required to admit dropouts who are ready and eligible for schooling.

3.27 The **Director of Social Welfare** has said that the SWD's involvement in tackling the problem of school dropouts relates to subventing the NGOs to provide a wide range of community-based youth services. The SWD encourages these service providers to collaborate with other stakeholders to help the needy youth, including school dropouts, and engage them positively.

## **PART 4: IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE BY SCHOOLS**

4.1 This PART examines the schools' efforts in improving student attendance and reports that the attendance rates in some schools are relatively low in comparison with other schools.

### **Student attendance rates in schools**

4.2 Based on the survey of the 623 schools (see para. 1.9), Audit found that, in terms of student attendance in 2005/06:

- (a) the average attendance rate was 98.3%, ranging from 91.3% to 99.7%;
- (b) the average attendance rate of primary schools (98.6%) was slightly higher than that of secondary schools (98.1%); and
- (c) the number of days absent per student who took leave (including unauthorised absence) varied among different class levels (see Appendix I). It decreased with the class level for primary students, but increased with the class level for junior secondary students. The highest number of days absent per student taking leave was 6.2 days for S3 students.

4.3 Unauthorised absence requires schools' attention. In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked whether or not they kept records of unauthorised student absence. Of the 462 schools which kept records of unauthorised absence, 306 (66%) heads of school said that the total school time lost in 2005/06 due to unauthorised absence was 110,450 days in their schools. For 126 schools, unauthorised student absence exceeded 100 days per school in 2005/06.

### **Measures taken by schools to improve student attendance**

4.4 Schools can make a difference by virtue of their management and teaching practices, which influence attendance. How schools tackle absence issues will, to some extent, depend upon individual circumstances, including the nature of the absence, the social and academic intake make-up of the school, and other external factors such as socio-economic background of the students. Audit noted that ten schools (see Appendix J) had attendance rates of 91.3% to 93.9%, which were lower than the average of 98.3% (see para. 4.2). According to research findings, early intervention on student absence is important. If students start to truant and find they can get away with it, getting them to change their behaviour as they get older will be more difficult.

4.5 Based on the audit questionnaire survey, of the 797 heads of school (9 did not respond to this question) who responded to the question about their views on the problem of student absence:

- (a) 749 (94%) heads of school considered student absence a minor or insignificant problem, or not a problem at all in their schools; and
- (b) 48 (6%) heads of school considered student absence a major or significant problem. They were concerned about the high absence rate, insufficient resources to deal with the problem and lack of effective measures to reintegrate students into normal school life.

Regarding the scope to reduce absence further, 275 (35%) heads of school considered that there was scope for improvement.

### **Audit observations**

#### ***Measures to improve student attendance/reduce truancy***

4.6 Audit notes that the EMB has not carried out surveys on common practices that work well in schools. However, in its Circular No. 11/2006, the EMB recommends some good practices that schools may use to improve student attendance.

4.7 In the audit questionnaire survey, heads of school were asked to name the most used measures to improve student attendance/reduce truancy. The responses of 806 heads of school are summarised in Table 8.

**Table 8**  
**Measures most used by schools**  
**to improve student attendance/reduce truancy**

Measure (Note)	Schools which named the measure as one of the most used measures for improving student attendance/reducing truancy	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
1. Providing continued pastoral care to students with emotional, developmental and personal problems	439	54%
2. Developing a caring pastoral system which valued students' individuality and recognised their contributions and concerns	435	54%
3. Organising school activities to cultivate in students a positive attitude towards themselves	410	51%
4. Organising school activities to cultivate in students a positive attitude towards learning	379	47%
5. Organising school activities to build relationship between teachers and students	341	42%
6. Conducting remedial teaching for low achievers	331	41%
7. Providing interesting extra-curricular activities	330	41%
8. Meeting with parents on a regular basis to identify problems faced by students	319	40%
9. Maintaining a clean and pleasant learning environment	318	39%
10. Organising school activities to help students establish their values according to well accepted moral principles and beliefs	313	39%

Source: *Audit questionnaire survey*

Note: *A head of school might name more than one measure most used by the school.*

4.8 To ascertain whether there are good practices adopted by schools to improve attendance/reduce truancy, Audit further analysed the attendance improvement measures adopted by schools with an attendance rate of 99% or above. Audit noted that, in general, these schools had also given priority to the measures stated in Table 8. **Audit considers that the EMB needs to make continued efforts to ascertain good practices in improving student attendance and disseminate these practices to schools for reference.**

*Actions taken on unauthorised student absence*

4.9 Apart from informing the NAC Team (see para. 2.4(a)), schools take other actions on unauthorised student absence. In the audit questionnaire survey, heads of school were asked about the actions they had taken on unauthorised student absence. The actions most commonly taken by the 753 schools (53 did not respond to this question) which responded to this question are summarised in Table 9.

**Table 9**

**Actions taken by schools on unauthorised student absence**

Action (Note)	Schools which had taken the action	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
Contacting the students' parents by phone/ student handbook	711	94%
Providing counselling to the students to encourage attendance	608	81%
Meeting with the students' parents at school	592	79%
Seeking assistance from SSWs	565	75%
Paying visits to the students' homes	393	52%

*Source: Audit questionnaire survey*

*Note: A school could take more than one action on unauthorised student absence.*

4.10 Most schools had documented the follow-up actions taken on unauthorised student absence. According to 734 heads of school, they documented the follow-up actions mainly in one or more of the following types of records:



- (a) students' disciplinary records (533 schools or 73%);
- (b) students' attendance records (517 schools or 70%); and
- (c) students' handbooks (308 schools or 42%).

Another 41 heads of school said that they did not record the follow-up actions taken. The remaining 31 heads of school did not respond to the question on the recording of the follow-up actions taken.

4.11 Records of follow-up action such as counselling and advising would not only give evidence of the progress of the students concerned, but would also facilitate schools to determine the guidance which could be further provided. **Audit considers that the EMB needs to remind schools to keep records of their follow-up action taken on unauthorised student absence.**

### **Students leaving school as a result of frequent/protracted period of absence**

4.12 According to EMB Circular No. 31/2003 which was in force before October 2006, any remedial service to help dropout students would only be effective within the school context. No student should be expelled without proper warning and notice to parents and without the approval of the Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower. The practice of some schools which advised students to leave school voluntarily as an alternative to expulsion was considered not acceptable. In October 2006, the EMB issued EMB Circular No. 11/2006. The new circular states that all schools should refrain from expelling students or advising students to leave school voluntarily, as such practices are educationally undesirable and defeat the purpose of providing schools with various resources to offer diversified and quality education to cater for children of different abilities and aptitudes.

### **Audit observations**

4.13 In the audit questionnaire survey, heads of school were asked to provide the number of students who had left school, either on their own accord or due to expulsion, as a result of frequent/protracted period of absence from the school. The information provided by 361 heads of school (out of 806 heads of school asked) is summarised in Table 10.

Table 10

## Students leaving school as a result of frequent/protracted period of absence

Students leaving school	Level of study when leaving school		
	P1 to P6	S1 to S3	S4 and S5
	(Number of students)	(Number of students)	(Number of students)
<i>On the student's own accord</i>			
2003/04	2,095	1,459	1,101
2004/05	2,088	1,336	997
2005/06	1,875	1,583	1,110
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>6,058</b>	<b>4,378</b>	<b>3,208</b>
<i>By expulsion</i>			
2003/04	19	21	13
2004/05	14	38	10
2005/06	11	34	12
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,102</b>	<b>4,471</b>	<b>3,243</b>

Source: Audit questionnaire survey

4.14 As shown in Table 10, a large number of students left schools, mostly on their own accord, as a result of frequent/protracted period of absence. **As it is the intention that schools should refrain from expelling students or advising students to leave voluntarily, the EMB needs to remind schools of helping students complete their education in the same school, and provide guidance where necessary.**

### **Need to obtain parental support to achieve sustained improvement**

4.15 It is widely accepted that parents play a crucial role in helping their children learn, and that parents' involvement in children's school education is conducive to their performance in schools and all-round development. Children achieve more when schools and parents work together, and when parents understand what the school is trying to achieve and how they can help. Apart from giving children vital coaching and advice outside of school hours, parents determine children's home environment, where they spend most of their waking hours.

### **Audit observations**

#### *Appealing for parents' support to tackle unauthorised absence*

4.16 Audit noted that, in general, the heads of school who responded to the audit questionnaire survey considered that family problems and personal problems of students were contributory factors of unauthorised absence. Schools generally appealed for parents' support to help tackle unauthorised absence through such measures as informing the students' parents of unauthorised absence by phone/student handbook, meeting with the parents at school and paying home visits. Some schools had taken these measures more readily. In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked to indicate the period of student absence which would trigger the measures. Table 11 below shows the responses of the schools to this question.

Table 11

## Period of student absence which triggered particular measures

Period of student absence	Percentage of schools informing parents by phone/student handbook	Percentage of schools meeting with parents at school	Percentage of schools paying home visits
≤ 1 day	81%	33%	5%
2 to 3 days	17%	39%	32%
4 to 5 days	1%	7%	10%
6 to 7 days	1% (Note 1)	19%	38%
8 to 14 days	—	2% (Note 2)	12%
15 to 40 days	—	—	3% (Note 3)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Audit questionnaire survey

Note 1: 662 heads of school said that the schools had informed parents by phone/student handbook of unauthorised student absence. Nine schools set a 7-day period as the trigger point for taking the measure.

Note 2: 499 heads of school said that the schools had met with parents at school in relation to unauthorised student absence. Two schools set a 14-day period as the trigger point for taking the measure.

Note 3: 309 heads of school said that the schools had paid home visits in relation to unauthorised student absence. One school set a 40-day period as the trigger point for taking the measure.

4.17 While the measures taken to appeal for parents' support should be commensurate with the extent of unauthorised absence (e.g. home visits might be conducted only for the more serious cases of unauthorised absence), the fact that some schools had taken action far less promptly than other schools was a cause for concern. In this connection, Audit notes that EMB Circular No. 11/2006 states that schools need to strengthen parent education and home-school cooperation to enable parents to understand the school policies on student attendance and support their children in meeting the requirements. **Audit considers that the**

**EMB needs to make continued efforts to ensure that schools seek parents' cooperation in dealing with truancy.**

4.18 To reduce student absence, some schools had given priority to enhancing communication with parents. Based on 806 heads of school's response to the audit questionnaire survey, the most commonly used measures included the following practices:

- (a) soliciting on a regular basis parents' views on school administration, and modifying the administrative procedures where appropriate (167 schools or 21%); and
- (b) meeting with parents on a regular basis to identify problems faced by students (319 schools or 40%).

Audit further noted from the audit questionnaire survey that, in 468 (58%) schools, parents also participated in the school's student guidance work.

4.19 **Audit considers that enhancing communication with parents and encouraging participation in student guidance work are good practices which help secure their cooperation in improving student attendance. The EMB needs to identify and disseminate good practices on communication with parents and encourage schools to involve parents more in their children's school activities.**

**Need to provide support to students who skip school**

*Causes for unauthorised absence*

4.20 The causes for unauthorised absence could also lie in the school environment and the quality and relevance of the curriculum/teaching. According to the responses of heads of school, teachers, student guidance staff, parents and students to the audit questionnaire survey, apart from family problems and personal problems of students, unauthorised absence was attributable to causes which lay in the school domain. Table 12 shows the results of the audit questionnaire survey.

Table 12

## Causes for unauthorised absence which lay in the school domain

Cause	Percentage of respondents who considered that unauthorised absence was attributable to the cause				
	Heads of school (Note 1)	Teachers (Note 2)	Student guidance staff (Note 2)	Parents (Note 3)	Students (Note 4)
Dull school curriculum	8%	15%	21%	20%	45%
Poor relationship with teachers	6%	13%	5%	8%	19%
Poor relationship with classmates	10%	14%	5%	6%	16%
Inadequate recognition of students' achievement and effort	7%	11%	11%	2%	7%
Lack of a caring pastoral system	6%	8%	16%	4%	11%
Lack of discipline in classrooms	6%	6%	11%	3%	8%
Unfair reward/punishment system	1%	4%	11%	5%	14%
Unreasonable school regulations	1%	2%	5%	7%	18%

Source: *Audit questionnaire survey*

Note 1: *Heads of school who had analysed the causes for unauthorised absence in their schools were asked to indicate the causes for the unauthorised absence in 2005/06. 326 heads of school responded to this question.*

Note 2: *Teachers and student guidance staff were asked to indicate, based on their experience, the most significant causes for unauthorised absence in their schools. 723 teachers and 19 student guidance staff responded to this question.*

Note 3: *Parents were asked whether or not their children had skipped school since 2005/06 without permission, and what the causes for skipping school were. 199 parents said that their children had skipped school and 194 of them indicated the causes.*

Note 4: *Students were asked whether or not they had skipped school since 2005/06 without the permission of parents, and what the causes for skipping school were. 168 students said that they had skipped school and 162 of them indicated the causes.*

**Concerns of students who skip school**

4.21 In the audit questionnaire survey, students who had skipped school were asked what could be done to prevent them from doing so again. Of the 168 students who said that they had skipped school, some indicated that in addition to solving their personal and family problems, they wished to see the following changes which might help them from skipping school:

- (a) an interesting curriculum (47 students or 28%);
- (b) less examinations (39 students or 23%);
- (c) improvement in school procedures (42 students or 25%);
- (d) fair school regulations (33 students or 20%); and
- (e) less schoolwork (49 students or 29%).

Eighteen (11%) of the 168 students who had skipped school also said that they needed a suitable school.

**Audit observations**

4.22 Not every student who skipped school had received the assistance they needed. In the audit questionnaire survey, students who had skipped school and parents whose children had skipped school were asked whether or not their schools had provided support to them. Of the 157 students and 176 parents who responded to this question, 46 (29%) students and 76 (43%) parents said that their schools had provided one or more of the following types of support:

- (a) providing remedial teaching to the students;
- (b) counselling on emotional, behavioural and personal problems of the students;
- (c) encouraging students to improve attendance;
- (d) informing parents of the students' truancy;
- (e) meeting with parents at school;
- (f) paying visits to the students' home;
- (g) referring cases to SSWs; and
- (h) referring cases to EPs.

In contrast, 111 (71%) students and 100 (57%) parents said that their schools had not provided any support to them in relation to the students' truancy since 2005/06.

**4.23 Audit considers that the EMB needs to remind and assist schools to provide adequate support to students who skip school and to strengthen collaboration with their parents, taking into account the students' concerns which are within the school domain.**

### **School attendance policy**

4.24 School attendance policies are important in prioritising, focusing attention and providing guidance on attendance matters. Without a clear policy, there is a risk that teachers and parents will not give attendance the priority that it deserves. The school may also find it more difficult to deal with absence and teachers may be inconsistent in handling individual cases of absence. Since the issue of EMB Circular No. 31/2003 in October 2003, schools have been required by the EMB to have a school attendance policy in place and have it developed and reviewed regularly with the involvement of all staff, parents and students. The components of a good attendance policy, as suggested by the EMB, are set out at Appendix K.

### **Audit observations**

#### *Need to establish school attendance policy*

4.25 In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked whether or not they had a school attendance policy. Of the 801 schools (5 did not respond to this question) which responded to this question, 641 (80%) heads of school said that they had a school attendance policy and 160 (20%) heads of school stated that they did not have a school attendance policy. According to the heads of school, the most common reason for not having the policy was that there was no such need. Table 13 shows the reasons stated by the 160 heads of school.



Table 13

## Reasons for not having a school attendance policy

Reason (Note)	Heads of school who stated the reason	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
There was no need for such a policy	81	51 %
There were problems in developing the policy	8	5 %
Resources were not available for developing the policy	18	11 %
Reasons other than the above, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— the school had complied with the EMB's circulars and guidelines</li> <li>— the school had relevant measures, procedures and guidelines despite it did not have a holistic attendance policy</li> <li>— the school would handle student absence on a case by case basis</li> <li>— the former head of school had not informed teachers of the requirement to formulate a school attendance policy</li> <li>— the school had a satisfactory attendance rate</li> </ul>	64	40 %

Source: Audit questionnaire survey

Note: A head of school could give more than one reason.

4.26 **Contents of school attendance policy.** Of the 641 schools which had a school attendance policy (see para. 4.25), 359 (56%) had provided copies of relevant documents for audit reference. Audit selected a random sample of 100 copies for examination and noted that some of the components of a good school attendance policy were lacking (see Appendix K). All of the 100 samples examined by Audit indicated that the schools focused on procedures and guidelines for attendance matters. Table 14 shows the results of Audit's examination.

Table 14

## Analysis of school attendance policies in the audit sample

Component of a good school attendance policy as suggested in EMB Circulars	Schools with attendance policy having the suggested component	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
Aim	33	33%
Strategies	75	75%
Mechanism for intervention	54	54%
Procedures and guidelines	100	100%
Reward systems	3	3%

Source: Audit questionnaire survey

4.27 **Management practices in schools without an attendance policy.** Audit noted that, comparing with schools which had an attendance policy, schools without a school attendance policy were generally less inclined to adopt useful management practices to help administer student attendance. In the survey, schools were asked to indicate the management practices they adopted. Of the 160 schools which stated that they did not have a school attendance policy (see para. 4.25), 44% analysed student absence on a regular basis; 64% produced management reports on student attendance and 59% reported actual and target attendance rates to school stakeholders. These rates are lower than the corresponding rates for schools which had an attendance policy. Details are shown in Table 15.

Table 15

**Management practices adopted by schools  
with or without attendance policy on student attendance**

Management practice	Percentage of schools	
	Without attendance policies	With attendance policies
Analysing student absence on a regular basis	44 %	67 %
Producing management information reports on student attendance	64 %	83 %
Reporting the actual and target attendance rates to school stakeholders	59 %	82 %

*Source: Audit questionnaire survey*

4.28 Audit notes that from time to time the EMB has given advice on developing a school policy on student attendance. **In view of the importance of establishing school attendance policy in each school, Audit considers that the EMB needs to monitor the compilation of school attendance policy by schools and assist those which have difficulties in complying with the EMB's requirements.**

### **Student guidance work**

4.29 The Education Commission, in its Report No. 4, recommended the implementation of a Whole School Approach (WSA) to Guidance in schools, whereby all teachers in a school actively participate in assisting students to resolve their developmental problems (e.g. behavioural problems such as truancy). Programme funds have been granted to public schools since 1992/93 for launching of guidance programmes. Starting from September 1998, the programme funds have been increased for schools to cover discipline work as well. With the provision of the programme funds, schools are expected to continue to launch school-based guidance and discipline programmes to improve students' sense of responsibility and self-discipline.

### **Audit observations**

4.30 In the audit questionnaire survey, heads of school were asked whether their schools had adopted the WSA for student guidance work. Of the 800 heads of school (6 did not respond to this question) responding to this question:

- (a) 771 (96%) heads of school said that their schools had adopted the WSA; and
- (b) 29 (4%) heads of school said that their schools had not adopted the WSA for at least one of the following reasons:
  - (i) lack of resources;
  - (ii) lack of experienced teachers;
  - (iii) the EMB had not made it mandatory to implement the WSA; and
  - (iv) WSA was not suitable for their schools.

4.31 The heads of school were asked whether their schools had a guidance team comprising a core group of teachers to plan, coordinate, implement and evaluate guidance work for students. Of the 771 heads of school who said that their schools had adopted the WSA, 769 (99.7%) said that their schools had such a guidance team.

4.32 According to the 769 heads of school, their schools had undertaken one or more of the following work items on student guidance:

- (a) carrying out surveys to ascertain team members' concern regarding the whole-person development of students in the school (449 schools or 58%);
- (b) assessing the whole-person development needs of students in the school (502 schools or 65%);
- (c) matching the guidance team members' concern with needs of students and setting a target for incorporating them into the curriculum (413 schools or 54%); and
- (d) setting up school-based workshops and experience sharing sessions for teachers who were not members of the guidance team, so as to enable them acquire skills in student guidance (632 schools or 82%).

4.33 The schools with a guidance team usually appointed guidance teachers as the team leader. Moreover, the majority of the heads of school said that at least half of their guidance team members had received training in basic skills in student guidance and counselling. Details are shown in Tables 16 and 17.

**Table 16**

**Team leaders of guidance teams in schools**

School staff member (Note)	Schools which appointed the staff member as team leader	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
Head of school	142	18%
Deputy head of school	130	17%
<b>Guidance teacher</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>57%</b>
Teacher	106	14%
Other personnel (e.g. SSW)	128	17%

Source: *Audit questionnaire survey*

Note: *In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked to indicate the persons appointed as leaders of their guidance teams. 769 heads of school responded to this question. In some schools, there were more than one team leaders.*

Table 17

**Guidance team members who had received training in basic skills in student guidance and counselling**

Proportion of team members who had received the training (Note)	Schools	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
All	78	10%
Over half	246	33%
Half	137	18%
Less than half	283	38%
None	10	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>754</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Audit questionnaire survey

Note: In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked to indicate whether or not their guidance team member had received training in basic skills in student guidance and counselling. 754 heads of school responded to this question.

4.34 Adoption of the WSA, underpinned by a strong guidance team, is conducive to helping students resolve their developmental problems including truancy. In this connection, Audit noted that some schools had appointed SSWs as guidance team members. Of the 21 SSWs surveyed by Audit, 16 (76%) were also a member of the guidance teams in their schools. **For schools which have not yet adopted the WSA, Audit considers that the EMB needs to encourage them to implement the WSA and provide support to these schools where appropriate. The EMB may also need to remind schools to consider the need for strengthening their guidance teams, having regard to their student attendance position.**

## **Audit recommendations**

4.35 **Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should:**

### *Measures taken by schools to improve student attendance*

- (a) **make continued efforts to ascertain good practices in improving student attendance and disseminate these practices to schools for reference (see paras. 4.8 and 4.19);**
- (b) **remind schools to keep records of their follow-up action taken on unauthorised student absence (see para. 4.11);**

### *Students leaving school as a result of frequent/protracted period of absence*

- (c) **remind schools to help students complete their education in the same school and provide guidance where necessary (see para. 4.14);**

### *Need to obtain parental support to achieve sustained improvement*

- (d) **make continued efforts to ensure that schools seek parents' cooperation in dealing with truancy (see paras. 4.17 and 4.19);**

### *Need to provide support to students who skip school*

- (e) **remind and assist schools to provide adequate support to students who skip school and to strengthen collaboration with the parents of such students, taking into account the students' concerns which are within the school domain (see para. 4.23);**

### *School attendance policy*

- (f) **ensure that all schools compile an attendance policy and assist those which have difficulties in complying with the EMB's requirements (see para. 4.28);**

### *Student guidance work*

- (g) **for schools which have not yet adopted the WSA for student guidance work, encourage them to implement the WSA and provide support to these schools where appropriate (see para. 4.34); and**
- (h) **remind schools to consider the need for strengthening their guidance teams having regard to their student attendance position (see para. 4.34).**

## Response from the Administration

4.36 The **Secretary for Education and Manpower** agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:

- (a) the EMB will continue to help schools devise strategies to instill in students positive values and help them develop a positive attitude towards schooling. Such strategies cover various areas, including:
  - (i) provision of a balanced curriculum and well-designed teaching and learning strategies to offer diversified and quality education to cater for children of different abilities and aptitudes;
  - (ii) cross-disciplinary collaboration and early intervention;
  - (iii) good use of the community resources available; and
  - (iv) close home-school partnership;
- (b) the EMB welcomes Audit's recommendation on parents' role to ensure students' attendance of schools. At present, over 90% of the public schools have set up a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). The EMB has been supporting the Committee on Home-School Cooperation, the PTAs of schools and the Federations of the PTAs of various districts in organising home-school cooperation activities and parent education programmes. The EMB will continue to step up its efforts in this regard and strengthen its collaboration with these set-ups and NGOs to organise programmes on focused themes for parents in need;
- (c) the EMB will continue to support schools to formulate a good school policy on student attendance that involves the participation and cooperation of parents who have a significant role in dealing with students with signs of truancy or school adjustment problems; and
- (d) almost all schools have adopted the WSA for student guidance work. The EMB will strengthen its support to the remaining few schools to implement a more holistic approach to student guidance. Schools should develop their social and learning environment to cater for students' whole-person development. For those schools with prominent student attendance problems, the EMB will urge them to strengthen their guidance teams in handling the issue of dropouts or truancy.



## **PART 5: RECORDING AND REPORTING OF STUDENT ATTENDANCE**

5.1 This PART examines the recording and reporting of student attendance in public primary and secondary schools.

### **Keeping of attendance records by schools**

5.2 As schools are at the front line to manage problems in student attendance, it is important for them to have updated and accurate information on student attendance so that action can be taken to tackle such problems at an early stage.

5.3 Schools may use a manual attendance register to record the attendance of students of a class during a school year, including attendance information of students in the class on each school day and the reasons for absence.

5.4 Apart from using manual attendance registers, with the introduction of the Web-based School Administration and Management System (WebSAMS) in 2003, all public schools may make use of the attendance module of WebSAMS to record daily attendance and compile analyses of attendance.

### **Audit observations**

#### *Need to improve utilisation of WebSAMS for recording attendance*

5.5 *Audit visit of 15 schools.* Audit visited 15 selected schools (Note 15) during the period October 2006 to January 2007, covering 5 primary schools and 10 secondary schools. The visits aimed to ascertain the school practices in relation to the recording of student attendance, based on each school's attendance register (for classes P1 to P6 and S1 to S3) during 2005/06 and 2006/07 (up to date of the audit visit).

5.6 Of the 15 schools visited, Audit noted that:

- (a) for recording student attendance:
  - (i) 5 (33%) schools only used manual attendance registers;
  - (ii) 7 (47%) schools used manual attendance registers and WebSAMS; and

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**Note 15:** *These schools were selected from schools which had cases of truancy reported to the NAC Team.*

- (iii) 3 (20%) schools used their own computer systems (not WebSAMS);
- (b) 2 schools used smart card systems to capture the arrival time of students at the school. The attendance information was then recorded in the attendance registers; and
- (c) some schools did not use WebSAMS to record daily attendance or analyse attendance because it was considered inconvenient.

5.7 *Audit questionnaire survey.* In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked to indicate the means by which it recorded student attendance. Audit noted that manual attendance register was the most common means used. Of the 804 schools (2 did not respond to this question) which responded to this question, 235 (29%) used manual attendance registers only, and 485 (60%) used manual attendance registers together with other electronic means. Only 84 (11%) of the responding schools used electronic means (without manual attendance registers). Table 18 shows the results of the audit questionnaire survey.

Table 18

## Means used by schools to record student attendance

Means for recording student attendance	Schools	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
Manual attendance registers only	235	29%
Manual attendance registers and either:		
— WebSAMS; or	394	49%
— Electronic means (not WebSAMS — Note)	91	11%
	} 485	} 60%
		} 89%
Electronic means only by:		
— WebSAMS	44	6%
— Other than WebSAMS (Note)	40	5%
	} 84	} 11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>804</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: *Audit questionnaire survey*

Note: *The electronic means included school-based electronic attendance systems, such as smart card attendance system and other specially designed computer systems, for recording attendance.*

5.8 Audit noted that the overall utilisation of WebSAMS attendance module was not high among schools. Of the above 804 schools, only 438 (i.e. 394 plus 44, or 55%) used WebSAMS attendance module.

5.9 *Need to improve utilisation of WebSAMS.* Audit noted that, based on the audit questionnaire survey (see para. 5.7), 45% of the schools surveyed did not make use of WebSAMS to record student attendance. They used, instead, various manual and electronic systems for recording attendance. **The EMB needs to encourage schools which use manual means for recording student attendance to migrate to electronic means (including using the attendance module of WebSAMS).**

#### *Classification of student absence*

5.10 Audit notes that the School Administration Guide issued by the EMB does not provide guidance for schools on how to record and categorise absence. There are potentially controversial areas such as what should be classified as authorised absence (i.e. absence with acceptable reason such as illness or medical appointment) and unauthorised absence (i.e. absence with reason which is not considered acceptable such as family holiday in term-time).

5.11 Based on the audit questionnaire survey, Audit noted that different practices were adopted by schools in the classification of absence. The audit findings are shown in Table 19 below.

**Table 19**  
**Classification of student absence**

Reason for absence	Percentage of schools which regarded the absence as		
	Authorised	Unauthorised	Not absent from school
<b>Sickness</b>			
Supported by medical certificate	99%	—	1%
Supported by leave application from the parents/guardian	97%	2%	1%
<b>Attending activities</b>			
On behalf of school (e.g. inter-school competition)	27%	—	73%
In their own capacity (e.g. sports competition)	77%	4%	19%
<b>Others</b>			
Leave application submitted by parents/guardian on, or before, the date of leave	98%	1%	1%
Leave application submitted by parents/guardian after leave started	82%	17%	1%

Source: *Audit questionnaire survey*

5.12 In Audit's view, the EMB may need to consider issuing guidelines on the classification of student attendance to assist schools to classify absence in conformity with good practice (see paras. 3.8 and 3.25(c)).

### Reporting of student attendance

5.13 To reduce student absence effectively, a school needs accurate and manageable data. This would facilitate regular analyses and reviews of absence at both the school and

individual student level. Useful information (e.g. the level and pattern of absence, including authorised and unauthorised absence; the trend of absence over a number of years and the causes for absence) can be obtained by performing reviews/analyses on absence in respect of the whole school, different class levels and different classes.

5.14 Student attendance is one of the key performance measures (KPM) developed by the EMB for school performance evaluation. In June 2003, when the school development and accountability (SDA — Note 16) framework was introduced, schools were required to provide school-level information on 11 mandatory KPM (Note 17), including student attendance, in their school reports. To increase transparency, the EMB requested schools to upload school reports onto the schools' websites. The EMB would conduct external school reviews to validate schools' self-evaluation.

## **Audit observations**

### ***Reporting of student attendance by schools***

5.15 In June 2004, in response to schools' concern about the need to publish KPM on the school website, the EMB decided to confine the reporting of schools' KPM to schools' key stakeholders only, including the School Management Committee, parents, teachers and students. Schools are not required to include any KPM items in the school report to be uploaded on the school website. Should schools choose to do so, they are required to do the same in subsequent years.

5.16 In December 2006, Audit reviewed the websites of the 50 schools that the EMB had conducted external school reviews in 2004/05 and found that:

- (a) 32 (64%) schools concerned provided their student attendance rates in their latest school reports;
- (b) 13 (26%) schools did not mention their student attendance rates in the school reports; and

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**Note 16:** *The SDA framework is a rigorous and systematic school self-evaluation framework under which schools have to strengthen their self-evaluation, including reporting their performance annually against the KPM.*

**Note 17:** *The 11 KPM selected for mandatory reporting include number of active school days, destination of exit students including early exits (for secondary schools), students' results in public examinations and student attendance.*

- (c) 5 (10%) schools did not upload their school reports on the website and therefore student attendance rates were not available.

5.17 In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked whether or not they reported their student attendance rates, for example, in the school newsletters and on their websites. Of the 794 heads of school (12 did not respond to this question) who responded to this question, 134 (17%) heads of school stated that they reported student attendance rates in the school website. Table 20 below shows the results of the survey.

**Table 20**

**School practices of reporting attendance rates**

Report medium	Percentage of responding schools which	
	reported attendance rates	did not report attendance rates
School newsletter	3%	97%
School website	17%	83%
School annual report	66%	34%

*Source: Audit questionnaire survey*

5.18 **Audit considers that putting student attendance statistics in the public domain is a good practice that provides appropriate information for stakeholders' reference. To facilitate easier public access, the EMB needs to encourage schools to publish attendance information on their websites.**

***Regular analysis of student absence***

5.19 Audit notes that while schools are required to report non-attendance cases on the seventh day of a student's continuous absence, there is no requirement for schools to perform reviews of student absence. In the audit questionnaire survey, schools were asked whether they regularly analysed student absence by parameters such as level, pattern, trend and causes for absence. Of the 797 heads of school (9 did not respond to this question) who responded to this question, 500 (63%) heads of school stated that they conducted regular analyses on student absence. 297 (37%) heads of school said that they did not do so regularly. For those schools which conducted regular analyses, the most common analysis

conducted was on the causes for absence of individual students. Table 21 below shows a summary of the analyses conducted by schools.

**Table 21**  
**Analyses on student absence conducted by schools**

Type of analyses	Schools	
	(Number)	(Percentage)
<i>Analysis on a school basis:</i>		
— level of student absence	293	59%
— pattern of student absence	176	35%
— trend of student absence	165	33%
— causes for student absence	230	46%
<i>Analysis by individual students:</i>		
— level of student absence	225	45%
— pattern of student absence	203	41%
— trend of student absence	168	34%
— <b>causes for student absence</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>68%</b>
All the above analyses	75	15%
Some of the above analyses	425	85%
	} 500	} 100%

Source: Audit questionnaire survey

5.20 To enhance the effectiveness of improving student attendance in schools, Audit considers that the EMB needs to encourage schools to perform regular reviews of student absence such as the causes and pattern of absence, so that schools may draw up appropriate support measures for students in need.

## **Audit recommendations**

5.21 **Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should:**

### *Keeping of attendance records by schools*

- (a) **encourage schools which use manual means for recording student attendance to migrate to electronic means (including using the attendance module of WebSAMS) (see para. 5.9);**

### *Reporting of student attendance*

- (b) **encourage schools to publish attendance information on their websites to facilitate easier public access (see para. 5.18); and**
- (c) **encourage schools to perform regular reviews of student absence such as causes for absence, so as to draw up appropriate support measures to students in need (see para. 5.20).**

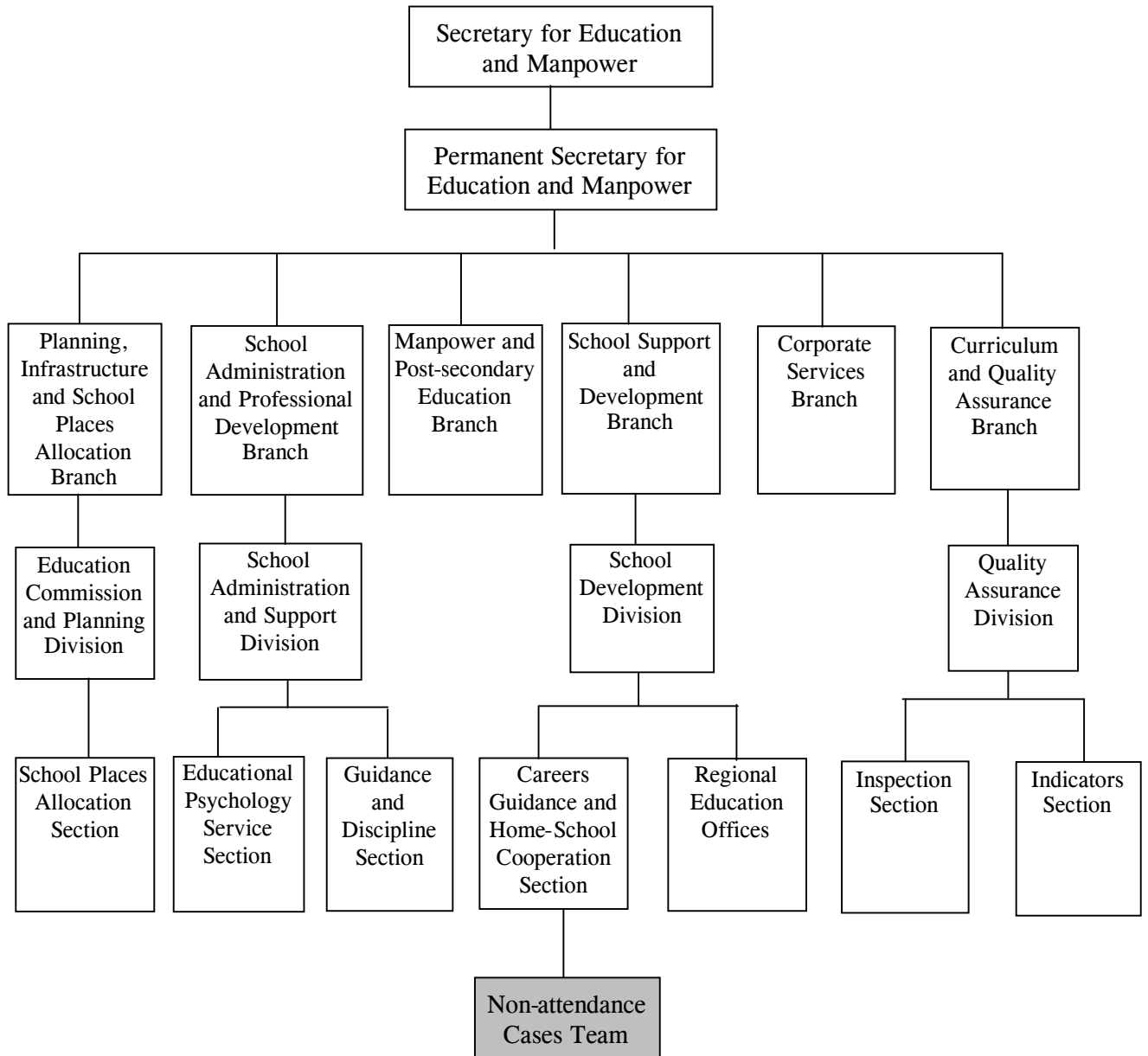
## **Response from the Administration**

5.22 **The Secretary for Education and Manpower generally agrees with the audit recommendations. He has said that:**

- (a) **with an increasing number of schools using smart card technology for recording attendance, the EMB is providing system interfaces to enable the sharing of data between WebSAMS and the smart card system. The EMB hopes that this will encourage more schools to use electronic means for recording student attendance; and**
- (b) **the EMB has advised schools in need to collect and analyse attendance data regularly for the purpose of identifying the causes and pattern of student absence, and devising solutions and evaluating the effectiveness of intervention measures. The EMB will continue to monitor the progress.**



**Organisation chart (extract) of the Education and Manpower Bureau  
as at 31 December 2006**



Source: EMB records

## **Methodology and response rates of Audit questionnaire survey**

### **Design of the audit questionnaires**

1. Before the survey, Audit interviewed eight heads of secondary school and held discussions with academics of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Baptist University to identify issues to be covered in the survey. The audit team then designed the survey questionnaires.
2. In September 2006, Audit forwarded the draft questionnaires to the EMB for comment. Subsequently, Audit conducted the questionnaire survey, sending different questionnaires to heads of school, teachers, student guidance staff, SSWs, students and students' parents.

### **Selection of audit samples**

3. ***Questionnaire for heads of school.*** Audit invited heads of all public primary schools and secondary schools to complete a questionnaire. A total of 977 questionnaires were issued (567 for primary schools and 410 for secondary schools).
4. ***Questionnaire for teachers.*** Audit invited the teachers (who were class masters/mistresses or members of the student guidance team) of 10 primary schools and 20 secondary schools to complete a questionnaire. Of the 30 selected schools, 15 schools (5 primary and 10 secondary) were randomly selected. The other 15 schools (5 primary and 10 secondary) were selected from schools which had suspected dropout cases reported to the NAC Team of the EMB. A total of 900 questionnaires were issued to teachers (300 for primary schools and 600 for secondary schools).
5. ***Questionnaire for student guidance staff.*** Audit invited the student guidance staff of the 30 selected schools mentioned in paragraph 4 above to complete a questionnaire. A total of 30 questionnaires were issued (10 for primary schools and 20 for secondary schools).
6. ***Questionnaire for school social workers.*** Audit invited the SSWs of the 30 selected schools mentioned in paragraph 4 above to complete a questionnaire. A total of 30 questionnaires were issued.
7. ***Questionnaire for students and students' parents.*** Audit invited 40 students each from P5 and P6 and S1 to S5 of the 30 selected schools mentioned in paragraph 4 above to complete a questionnaire and also invited their parents to complete a questionnaire. P1 to P4 students were excluded because they were considered too young to complete a questionnaire independently. A total of 9,600 questionnaires were issued (800 for

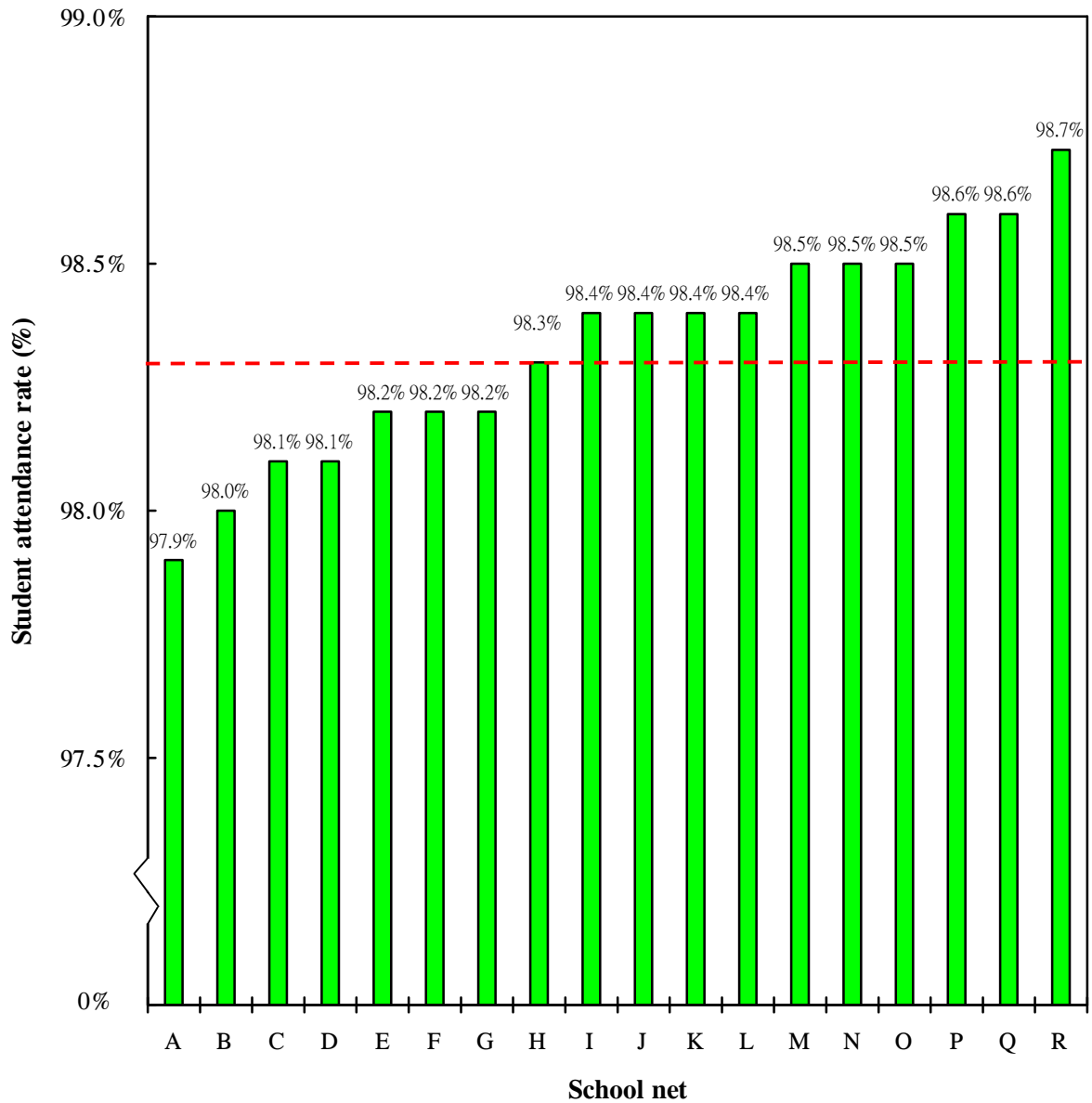
primary students, 800 for their parents, 4,000 for secondary students and 4,000 for their parents).

8. *Questionnaire for non-governmental organisations.* Audit invited 10 NGOs to complete a questionnaire. A total of 10 questionnaires were issued.

#### **Response rates**

9. *Questionnaire for heads of school.* 977 questionnaires were issued and 806 (82%) were returned. 464 (82%) heads of primary school and 342 (83%) heads of secondary school returned the questionnaires.
10. *Questionnaire for teachers.* 900 questionnaires were issued and 723 (80%) were returned. 220 (73%) primary school teachers and 503 (84%) secondary school teachers returned the questionnaires.
11. *Questionnaire for student guidance staff.* 30 questionnaires were issued and 19 (63%) were returned. 6 (60%) primary school student guidance staff and 13 (65%) secondary school student guidance staff returned the questionnaires.
12. *Questionnaire for school social workers.* 30 questionnaires were issued. 21 (70%) SSWs returned the questionnaires.
13. *Questionnaire for students and students' parents.* 9,600 questionnaires were issued and 7,816 (81%) were returned. 689 (86%) primary school students, 689 (86%) primary school students' parents, 3,242 (81%) secondary school students and 3,196 (80%) secondary school students' parents returned the questionnaires.
14. *Questionnaire for non-governmental organisations.* 10 questionnaires were issued. 8 (80%) NGOs returned the questionnaires.

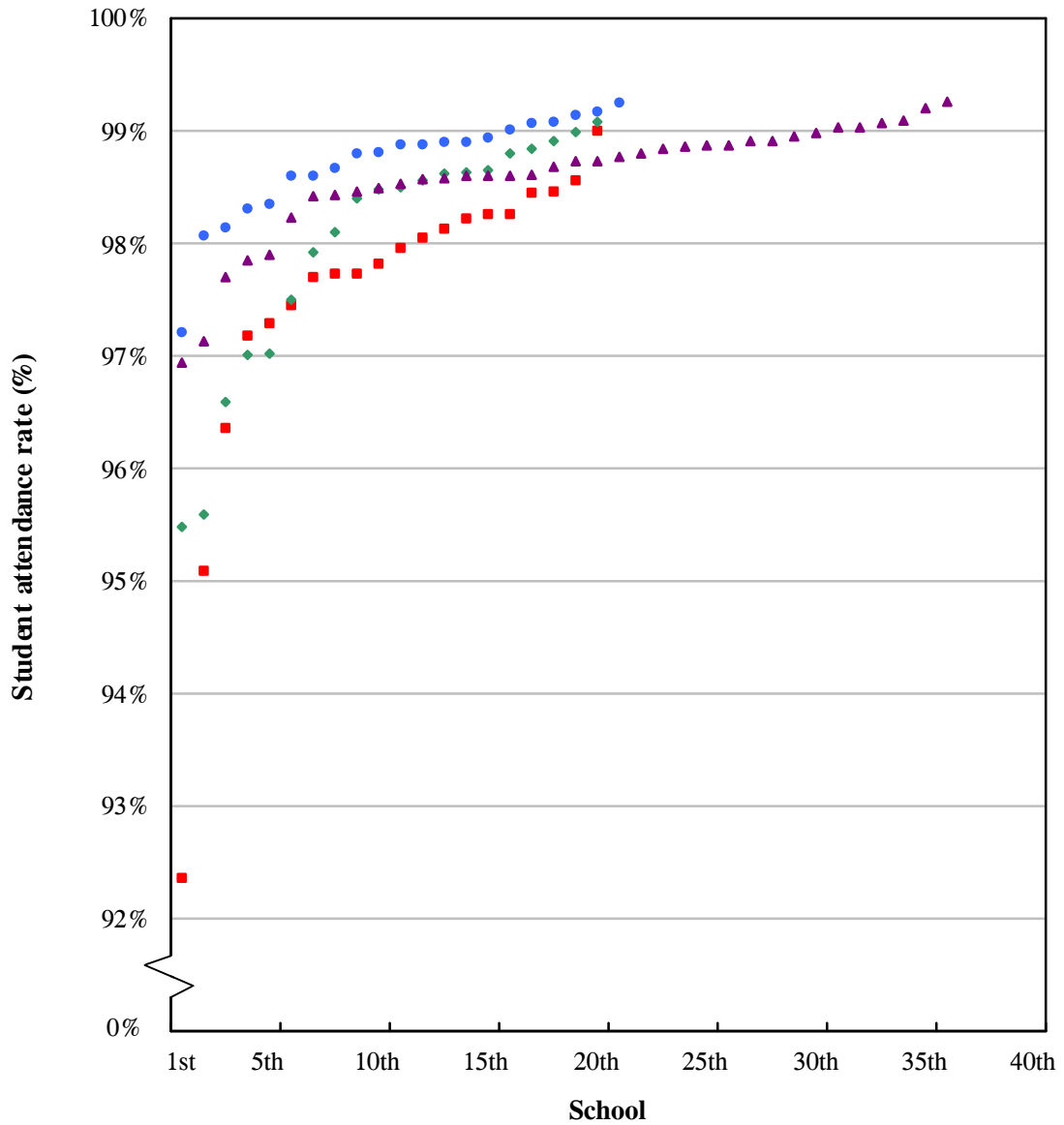
Average student attendance rates of the 18 school nets  
(2005/06)



Legend: - - - - Average student attendance rate of 98.3% for 623 schools surveyed

Source: Audit analysis of EMB and school records

**Variation of student attendance rates among schools  
 in selected school nets (2005/06)**



- Legend: ■ School Net A (total 20 schools)  
 ◆ School Net B (total 20 schools)  
 ▲ School Net Q (total 36 schools)  
 ● School Net R (total 21 schools)

Source: *Audit analysis of EMB and school records*

Note: *Schools in the same school net were arranged in the order of their student attendance rates, i.e. the first school having the lowest student attendance rate and the last one having the highest student attendance rate.*

## **EMB projects to improve self-discipline of students**

### ***A. Understanding Adolescent Project***

Upon the successful completion of the pilot project in 2003/04, the Understanding Adolescent Project was rolled-out in 2004/05 and extended to 500 primary schools in 2006/07. Through the project which consists of classroom-based guidance activities for students and training for the teachers, identified students and their parents, the resilience of students (including their competence, belongingness and optimism) can be enhanced.

### ***B. Enhanced Smart Teen Project***

The EMB has collaborated with different disciplinary forces, such as the Hong Kong Police Force and the Fire Services Department, to conduct the Smart Teen Project since 2000 with the aim of helping secondary school students to become confident, self-disciplined and sociable through highly structured discipline and physical training. Starting from 2005/06, the project has been further enhanced by equipping teachers with necessary skills on guidance and discipline such as debriefing skills to facilitate students' self-reflection. The project benefits about 2,000 secondary school students each year.

### ***C. Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme***

Starting from 2005/06, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust has provided funding to implement the scheme in collaboration with the EMB and the SWD. Targeting at junior secondary students, the scheme aims to promote the holistic development of young people such as bonding with others, and holding healthy beliefs and clear values. In 2006/07, a total of 49 schools participated in the experimental phase, while 227 schools joined the full implementation phase of the scheme.

### ***D. Co-creating a Harmonious School***

The EMB has developed a resource package entitled "Co-creating a Harmonious School" which aims at enhancing teachers' knowledge of the problem of bullying and supporting schools to assess the problem and formulate intervention, follow-up support and preventive strategies. The package comprises an assessment questionnaire to review the bullying situation in schools, lesson plans, classroom activities and teacher training workshop materials. The resource package has been issued to all primary and secondary schools in January 2004 in parallel with a series of workshops on management and prevention of bullying.

***E. Interface between primary and secondary schools***

To help P6 students adapt well to secondary school life, since 2003/04, the EMB has implemented a series of district networking programmes to promote the interface between primary and secondary schools. Sharing sessions for teachers in primary and secondary schools have been conducted to enhance their understanding and collaboration on working with P6 leavers and S1 students. Orientation days, talks and exhibitions have also been organized to prepare P6 leavers and their parents to face this transitional period. In 2005/06, the interface programmes served 35 primary schools and 20 secondary schools with a total of 4,600 teachers, students and parents.

*Source: EMB records*

**Number of habitual truancy/non-attendance cases  
that required follow-up action by primary and secondary schools**

**(A) Primary schools**

<b>School year</b>	<b>Number of guidance and discipline cases reported</b>	<b>Number of habitual truancy/ non-attendance cases (%) (Note 1)</b>
2005/06 (Note 2)	5,325	114 (2.1%)
2004/05	5,437	143 (2.6%)
2003/04	5,956	116 (2.0%)
2002/03	5,693	152 (2.7%)
2001/02	6,253	161 (2.6%)
2000/01	5,695	142 (2.5%)

**(B) Secondary Schools**

<b>School year</b>	<b>Number of guidance and discipline cases reported</b>	<b>Number of habitual truancy/ non-attendance cases (%) (Note 1)</b>
2005/06 (Note 2)	14,778	2,003 (13.6%)
2004/05	18,025	1,526 (8.5%)
2003/04	19,345	1,797 (9.3%)
2002/03	20,055	1,853 (9.2%)
2001/02	21,207	1,800 (8.5%)
2000/01	19,600	1,648 (8.4%)



**Appendix F**  
(Cont'd)  
(paras. 3.5 and  
3.6 refer)

**(C) Primary and secondary schools**

School year	Total number of guidance and discipline cases reported	Total number of habitual truancy/ non-attendance cases (%) (Note 1)
2005/06 (Note 2)	20,103	2,117 (10.5%)
2004/05	23,462	1,669 (7.1%)
2003/04	25,301	1,913 (7.6%)
2002/03	25,748	2,005 (7.8%)
2001/02	27,460	1,961 (7.1%)
2000/01	25,295	1,790 (7.1%)

Source: *EMB records*

Note 1: *In the EMB survey on guidance and discipline cases, schools are not required to report the number of habitual truancy cases and the number of non-attendance cases separately.*

Note 2: *Starting from 2005/06, the EMB collects information of the top five student guidance and discipline problems from individual schools. The number of habitual truancy/ non-attendance cases reported only includes those from schools with habitual truancy/ non-attendance being one of the top five problems.*

**Initiatives on services for the youth implemented by the SWD  
in collaboration with government bureaux/departments and NGOs**

**A. Centre services**

Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres (ICYSCs) are established to provide a wide range of services including children and youth centre services, outreaching social work and school social work services under one management to meet the multifarious needs of young people aged between 6 to 24. With the flexibility in deploying manpower and other resources and through adopting different service models/approaches, the ICYSCs provide four core programmes, i.e. guidance and counselling, supportive service for young people in disadvantaged circumstances, socialization programmes, and development of social responsibility and competence. Non-core programmes, such as drop-in service and interest groups, are also provided to offer opportunities for children and youth to spend their leisure time constructively.

**B. District Youth Outreaching Social Work Service**

District Youth Outreaching Social Work Teams are set up to reach out and provide counselling and guidance to those young people aged between 6 to 24 who normally do not participate in conventional social or youth activities and are vulnerable to undesirable influences. Since 1 September 2002, 16 District Youth Outreaching Social Work Teams run by 11 NGOs have been providing outreaching service to address the needs of high-risk youth and to tackle issues of juvenile gangs.

**C. Overnight outreaching service for young night drifters**

Starting from September 2001, 18 ICYSCs, equipped with additional manpower, vehicles and mobile phones, have extended their service focus to provide overnight outreaching services for young night drifters.

**D. Community Support Service Scheme**

The Community Support Service Scheme (CSSS) aims at helping children and youth cautioned under the Police Superintendents' Discretion Scheme with a view to reintegrating them into the mainstream education or workforce and reducing the likelihood of re-offending. The services include individual and family counselling, therapeutic groups, skill training/educational groups, adventure activities and community services. Currently, there are five NGOs operating the CSSS and the CSSS teams are attached to five ICYSCs.

***E. Conducting family conference for children/juveniles***

To enhance support for young offenders, the mechanism of family conference has been introduced for children/juveniles cautioned under the Police Superintendent's Discretion Scheme since 1 October 2003. The objectives of family conference are to bring together the cautioned juveniles and their family members as well as professionals from relevant government departments/agencies at an early stage to assess the needs of the juveniles and to draw up follow-up plan to address their needs.

***F. Committee on Services for Youth at Risk***

The Committee on Services for Youth at Risk is a forum set up in 1993 to facilitate multi-disciplinary, cross-sector, cross-bureau/department coordination and collaboration measures to address the changing and multifarious needs of young people as well as to enhance interfacing at service policy and working level. The Committee is chaired by the Director of Social Welfare, with members from Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, Security Bureau, Home Affairs Bureau, the EMB, Hong Kong Police Force, Department of Health, the SWD, Action Committee Against Narcotics, Committee on Home-school Cooperation, tertiary academic institution, education sector as well as NGOs.

*Source: SWD records*

**A case on successfully reintegrating a student into a mainstream school**

In 2003, a student left school when he was studying in S2. He left because of the influence of peer groups and loss of interest in studying.

He had taken several jobs. Each job brought him low income but required very hard work. He decided to return to school to better equip himself. However, he could not find any school place.

In 2005, upon the referral of a social worker, the student participated in a temporary placement programme of an NGO. He performed very well in the programme and successfully completed it without any absence or lateness.

Through the arrangement of the NGO, a school interviewed the student and admitted him into S3.

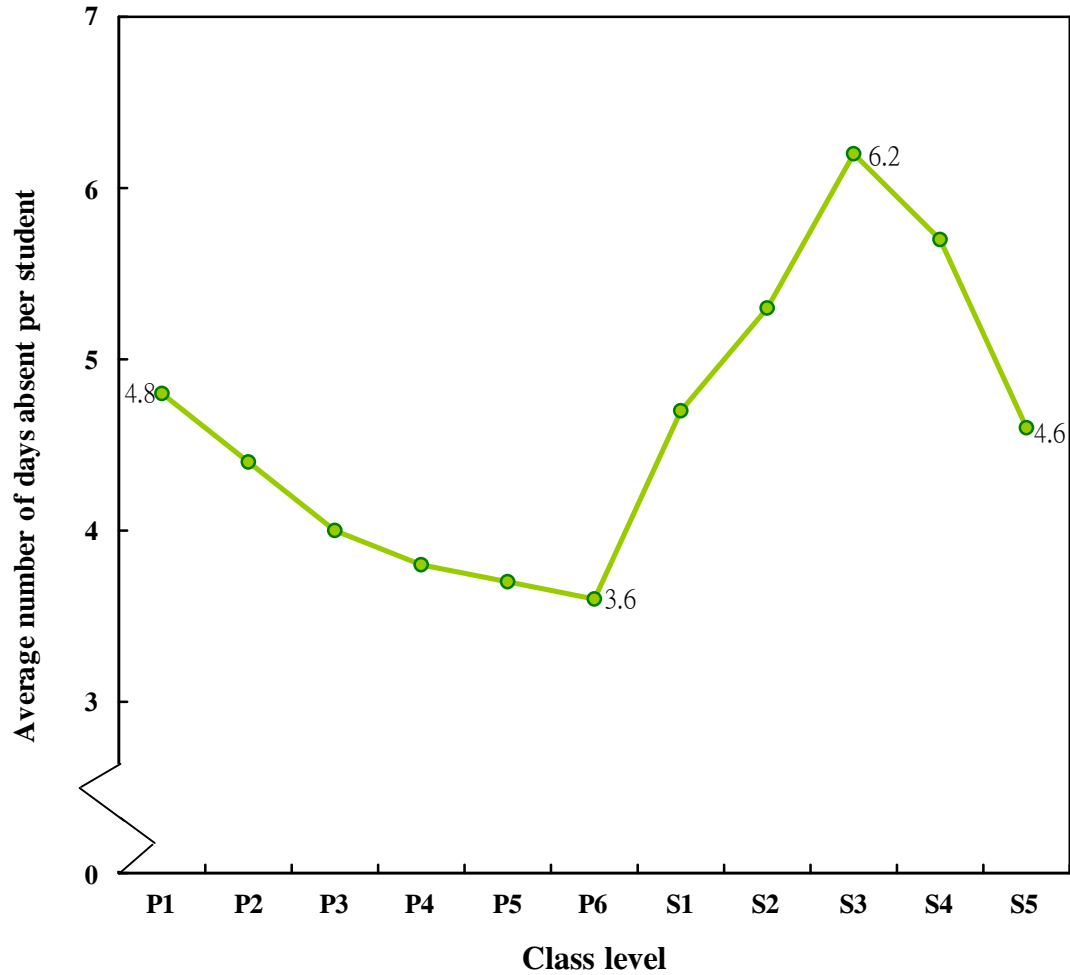
The student continued his study in the school very satisfactorily. In an examination, he came first in his class. He was also recruited into the school basketball team.

***Audit findings***

***Audit considers that for dropouts who had the ability and intention of returning to school, they should be given the chance to do so. The cooperation of the school and the NGO had enabled a dropout to resume a normal school life.***

*Source: Audit questionnaire survey*

Average number of days absent per student who took leave  
(including unauthorised absence)  
for different class levels in 2005/06



Source: Audit analysis of school records

**Ten schools with lowest student attendance rates  
in 2005/06 among the 623 schools surveyed**

<b>School</b>	<b>Student attendance rate (%)</b>	<b>Average number of days absent per student</b>
1	91.3	16.9
2	91.5	16.7
3	91.5	16.4
4	92.0	14.1
5	92.6	14.2
6	93.5	12.4
7	93.5	12.2
8	93.7	11.6
9	93.8	11.1
10	93.9	11.6

***Comparison***

<b>Average of 623 schools surveyed (see para. 1.10)</b>	<b>98.3</b>	<b>3.2</b>
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*Source: Audit analysis of school records*

### **Components of a good school attendance policy**

The EMB requires schools to develop a school policy on student attendance. According to the suggested practices in EMB circulars, a good school attendance policy should include the following components:

- (a) ***Aim.*** The policy should aim at developing students' regular attendance habits as well as inculcating a positive attitude and value towards schooling;
- (b) ***Strategies.*** Strategies should be adopted for different areas of the attendance policy. For example, there could be a strategy for a balanced curriculum and well-designed teaching and learning to cater for the learning needs of students with different abilities and aptitudes, a strategy for cross-disciplinary collaboration to integrate the school's student guidance and discipline work to promote whole-person development and rule-abiding behaviours among students, and a strategy for a holistic early intervention approach to involve teachers and student guidance staff to develop students' positive attitude and value towards schooling;
- (c) ***Mechanism for intervention.*** A mechanism should be in place for timely and proper intervention from teachers in collaboration with other parties, such as student guidance staff or NGOs in the community, so that appropriate support can be provided to students at risk for preventing them from departing schools pre-maturely;
- (d) ***Procedures and guidelines.*** Clear procedures and guidelines should be formulated for different school personnel to follow. Examples are:
  - (i) circumstances in which the school will or will not authorise absence;
  - (ii) measures to ensure that cases of student transfer between schools are genuine and that the students are really attending class in their new schools;
  - (iii) administrative steps that a classroom teacher should take when a student of his/her class is absent or drops out from school; and
  - (iv) samples of forms used in connection with student attendance, and details of any personnel/professionals who may offer advice and support to parents; and
- (e) ***Reward systems.*** There should be a range of reward systems to reinforce and celebrate good and improved student attendance. Parents, learning mentors and partner schools should be involved in the celebrations where relevant.

*Source: EMB records*

**Acronyms and abbreviations**

Audit	Audit Commission
CSSS	Community Support Service Scheme
EMB	Education and Manpower Bureau
EP	Educational psychologist
HKPA	Hong Kong Playground Association
ICYSC	Integrated Children and Youth Services Centre
IRB	Internal Review Board
KPM	Key performance measures
NAC Team	Non-attendance Cases Team
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
P1 to P6	Primary One to Six
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
S1 to S7	Secondary One to Seven
SBM	School-based management
SDA	School development and accountability
SDO	School Development Officer
SGO	Student Guidance Officer
SPA	School Places Allocation
SSW	School social worker
SWD	Social Welfare Department
WebSAMS	Web-based School Administration and Management System
WSA	Whole School Approach