

# **Report No. 48 of the Director of Audit — Chapter 7**

## **STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

### **Summary**

1. 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. Overseas research suggests that children who are regularly absent from school are more easily drawn into crime and anti-social behaviour and more likely to become out of work after leaving school.

2. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the effectiveness of the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) and public primary and secondary schools in improving student attendance. In order to collate data and information on student attendance practices, Audit conducted a questionnaire survey on schools, students, parents and selected non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and visited some schools. Audit notes that while the EMB and schools have taken continuous action to improve the student attendance in public schools, there are still areas for further improvement.

### **Attendance in schools**

3. 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 public primary schools and 414,000 students in public secondary schools, making a total of 788,000 students.

4. Audit found that, in terms of student attendance in the 623 schools covered by the audit survey, in 2005/06: (a) about 151,000 students did not take any leave; (b) the average attendance rate was 98.3%, ranging from 91.3% to 99.7%; and (c) the overall absence rate was 3.2 days per student (2.8 days per primary student and 3.6 days per secondary student).

### **Improving student attendance by the Education and Manpower Bureau**

5. The Non-attendance Cases (NAC) Team of the EMB is tasked to deal with suspected dropout cases reported with the aim to assist students go back to school at the earliest and possible convenience.

6. ***Delay in reporting suspected dropout cases by schools.*** Prior to 27 October 2006, schools had to urgently report to the NAC Team of the EMB if a student, who was aged between 6 and 15 and had not yet completed Secondary Three, 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.

7. Delay in opening case files may render it difficult for the NAC Team to take prompt action to assist dropout students to resume schooling. In an examination of 60 suspected dropout cases, there were cases where it took over 100 days for schools to report these cases. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should 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.*

8. ***Delay in identifying suspected dropout cases from annual enrolment surveys.*** Audit conducted an analysis of the file opening dates of 3,402 suspected dropout cases identified by the NAC Team, based on verified data on students who had not enrolled in Primary One (P1) and Secondary One (S1) in 2004/05 and 2005/06. 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. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should consider whether it is feasible for the School Places Allocation 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.*

9. ***Delay in identifying suspected dropout cases based on school transfers.*** Prior to 27 October 2006, schools had to report to the EMB within 14 days of students' absence due to school transfers. Suspected dropout cases would be identified when the EMB 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. Audit noted that 55% of the suspected dropout case files opened in 2004/05 and 2005/06 were opened more than 30 days after the date of a student's last school attendance, with 1,300 cases exceeding 100 days. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should provide more guidance to schools in reporting school transfers so that suspected dropout cases would be reported promptly to the NAC Team.*

10. ***Time-frame for handling suspected dropout cases not strictly followed.*** In 2004/05 and 2005/06, 1,016 suspected dropout 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 Internal Review Board, which would consider issuing warning letters or attendance orders. 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 Board, six warning letters were issued for four cases and no attendance order was issued. *Audit has*

*recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should ensure that the NAC Team adheres to the stipulated time-frame in taking action to assist dropouts to resume schooling as soon as possible.*

### **Provision of guidance and support to schools by the Education and Manpower Bureau**

11. ***Increasing concern of the problem of truancy in schools.*** The EMB conducts an annual survey on guidance and discipline cases handled by schools. In 2005/06, “habitual truancy/non-attendance” ranked second (after “disruptive behaviour in school”) in terms of the total number of cases reported by secondary schools and accounted for over 13% of the total cases reported. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should strengthen the support measures in tackling habitual truancy problem and provide additional support to schools in which truancy is one of the common guidance and discipline problems.*

12. ***Provision of guidance to schools.*** In response to the audit questionnaire survey, 553 (70%) heads of school said that they would like to have further guidance on classification of leave, dealing with difficult parental practice and examples of good practices. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should consider providing assistance to those schools which wish to have further guidance on improving their student attendance.*

13. ***Need for EMB’s support on student attendance.*** 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. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should 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.*

14. ***NGO’s assistance to EMB and schools in tackling the problem of school dropouts.*** 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. In three of the NGOs surveyed, about 20% of the students who were graduates of their placement programmes were not admitted by schools. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should 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.*

### **Improving student attendance by schools**

15. ***Actions taken on unauthorised student absence.*** According to the audit questionnaire survey, the actions most commonly taken on unauthorised student absence were: (a) contacting the students’ parents by phone/student handbook; (b) providing counselling to students to encourage attendance; (c) meeting with students’ parents at school; (d) seeking assistance from school social workers; and (e) paying visits to students’

home. However, some schools did not record the follow-up actions taken. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should remind schools to keep records of their follow-up action taken on unauthorised student absence.*

16. ***Students leaving school as a result of frequent/protracted period of absence.*** 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. 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. In the audit questionnaire survey, 361 (45%) heads of school indicated that many students left schools, mostly on their own accord, as a result of frequent/protracted period of absence. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should remind schools to help students complete their education in the same school and provide guidance where necessary.*

17. ***Appealing for parents' support to tackle unauthorised absence.*** 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. 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. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should make continued efforts to ensure that schools seek parents' cooperation in dealing with truancy.*

18. ***Need to provide support to students who skip school.*** Not every student who skipped school had received the assistance they needed. In the audit questionnaire survey, students and parents were asked whether their schools had provided support to them. Of the 157 students who had skipped school and 176 parents whose children had skipped school, 111 (71%) students and 100 (57%) parents said that their schools had not provided any support to them in relation to the students' truancy. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should 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.*

19. ***School attendance policy.*** Since the issue of EMB Circular No. 31/2003 in October 2003, schools have been required to have a school attendance policy in place and have it developed and reviewed regularly with the involvement of all staff, parents and students. In response to the audit questionnaire survey, 160 (20%) heads of school indicated that they did not have a school attendance policy. The most common reason for not having the policy was that there was no such need. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should ensure that all schools compile an attendance policy and assist those which have difficulties in complying with the EMB's requirements.*

20. ***Student guidance work.*** 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). In response to the audit questionnaire survey, 29 (4%) heads of school said that their schools had not adopted the WSA. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should, 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.*

### **Recording and reporting of student attendance**

21. ***Keeping of attendance records by schools.*** According to the audit questionnaire survey, 235 (29%) schools surveyed used manual attendance registers to record student attendance. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should encourage schools which use manual means for recording student attendance to migrate to electronic means (including using the attendance module of the Web-based School Administration and Management System).*

22. ***Regular analysis of student absence by schools.*** 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 response to the audit questionnaire survey, 297 (37%) heads of school said that they did not regularly analyse student absence by parameters such as level, pattern, trend and causes for absence. For those schools which conducted regular analyses, the most common analysis conducted was on the causes for absence of individual students. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education and Manpower should encourage schools to perform regular reviews of student absence so as to draw up appropriate support measures to students in need.*

### **Response from the Administration**

23. The Secretary for Education and Manpower generally agrees with the audit recommendations.

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