RESPECT
FOR
ALL

FRAMEWORK

ADDRESSING
ATTENDANCE
IN SCHOOLS
POLICY

OCTOBER 2014

ADDRESSING ATTENDANCE
IN SCHOOLS

POLICY

CONTENT

TERMINOLOGY

Parents
refers to the biological or legal guardians of the students attending the school (Education Act, 2012).

College
refers to a network of schools, within them State boys and girls schools, and which would ensure educational experience and services in a full and continuous process starting from early childhood education, and through the primary and secondary levels. Every College shall be under the responsibility, guidance and administration of a Principal (Education Act, 2012).

School
means an institution, the resources of which, both of persons and of things, are ordained towards the promotion of the education and training of other persons through the dissemination of knowledge. School refers to primary, middle, secondary schools, resource centre and learning support centre.

Home tuition
refers to when a student who is away from school due to prolonged illness (physical and mental ill–health) receives tuition at home. These students benefit from an educational programme which needs to include a re-integration plan.

Compulsory school age
refers to any age from five years to fifteen years, both inclusive, and accordingly a person shall be deemed to be of compulsory school age if he has attained the age of five years and has not attained the age of sixteen years.

School climate
refers to an environment that is physically, emotionally, intellectually safe for all school community members.

School culture
refers to the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school.

Culture
refers to the outlook, attitudes, values, moral goals, and customs shared by a society.

For ease of reference the use of 'he', him' and 'his' shall be used for all genders.

01
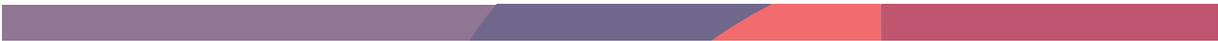
PHILOSOPHY AND AIMS
OF THE POLICY

The Addressing Attendance in Schools Policy adopts a whole school approach philosophy. This approach is defined as a unified collective and collaborative action in and by educators, administrators, parents and students that has been strategically constituted to improve student learning behaviour and well being and the conditions that support these.

THIS POLICY AIMS TO:

/ Maximise school completion for all students.

/ Raise student achievement and close gaps in student performance.

/ Identify attendance patterns in order to design attendance improvement efforts.

/ Verify that individual students are complying with education legislation relating to compulsory attendance.

/ Promote the value of education.

02

BACKGROUND

This policy is guided by and builds upon the recommendations as presented in the 'School Attendance Improvement' report commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (2005). The findings in this report are still relevant to the present context.

Poor school attendance lowers the literacy and numeracy rates of any country (Thompson, 2008). Absenteeism places students at risk with the result that they are unable to achieve their educational, social and psychological potential and are disadvantaged in the quality of choices they are able to make in later life situations.

The concept of a single cause-effect relationship to explain the phenomenon of school absenteeism is inappropriate. One must consider a complex web of interrelated, interacting and multidirectional forces.

These include:

01. Student (individual) factors such as psycho-social variables, physical factors and/or behavioural factors (Etsey, 2005);

02. Family factors such as structure, functioning and socio-economic status;

03. School factors such as school organisation, curriculum and class, school culture and climate;

04. Community and Society variables such as culture, demographic factors and poverty.

Truants and persistent absentees are most likely to come from disadvantaged home backgrounds and unfavourable social circumstances and that chronic absence is associated with lower student academic achievement (Sanchez, 2012).

Table 1 below indicates the range of problems of students with chronic absenteeism as identified from the caseload of the educational social workers employed in Colleges:

STUDENT

Physical Health Problems
Mental Health Problems
Learning Difficulties and Disabilities
School Phobia/School Refusal
Separation anxiety
Addictions
Students with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties (SEBD)
Peer Pressure
Failure to learn

SCHOOL

Bullying
Culture and Cultural expectations
Boredom and lack of motivation for learning

FAMILY

Physical Health Problems
Mental Health Problems
Financial difficulties
Unemployment
Inadequate parental interest, support and recognition of the value of education
Breakdown of parents' relationship
Addictions
Domestic violence
Child Protection issues
Bereavement
Literacy difficulties
Young carers
Students working in family business
Over protectiveness

COMMUNITY

Bullying
Anti-School Culture

Habitually absent students are identified as one of the most disadvantaged groups at risk of poverty. Poor attendance has been linked to poor academic achievement and impacts upon self-esteem, behaviour, employability and the subsequent quality and economic status of former truants in their adult life (Reid, 1999). There is a direct correlation between regular school attendance and school achievement (Gottfried, 2010).

The European Union (EU) has set five targets to be reached by 2020. One of these targets is that of reducing the rate of early school leaving (ESL) to less than 10% (MEDE, 2014).

Early School Leavers (ESL) have been identified as another disadvantaged group; a group which is currently high on the National Agenda. The EU defines early school leavers as those 'young people leaving education and training with no more than lower secondary education' (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2013).

Early school leavers are those who will have limited life chances, will be channelled towards dead-end jobs if any, affecting their lifetime earnings; are more prone to join the working or non-working poor; and are at risk of social exclusion. Early school leavers have their health and well-being affected, and more likely to depend on higher social benefits. Therefore early school leavers are those who will be less likely to fulfill their potential as human beings, as active citizens who participate less in democratic processes and as principal actors in the labour market (MEDE, 2014).

03

LEGISLATION

The Policy aims to address attendance in Schools in Malta and Gozo and to help Schools meet their responsibilities and duties under the Education Act 2012 and subsequent Legal Notices.

According to Article 5 of the Education Act, Chapter 327 of the Laws of Malta it is the duty of every parent of a child who is of compulsory school age to ensure that the child attends school every day unless the minor has a good and sufficient cause to be absent from school. If a parent fails to ensure regular school attendance he will be guilty of an offence and shall, on conviction, be liable to the punishments established by law. The Education Act also provides that in the case of a second or subsequent conviction of any such offence by any parent the Court may also deprive the parent of his authority, whether de jure or de facto, over the minor and may appoint a tutor for that purpose (Article 133 (1) Education Act).

04

TYPES OF NON-ATTENDANCE

4.1

Unauthorised Non-Attendance with parental knowledge
occurs in situations in which a parent or carer approves their child's late arrival or non-attendance at school. Alternatively, although parents may not approve such absence, they may fail or be unable to enforce attendance. Such absence includes students who work in the family business and students who against their will are kept from attending school to care for a family member.

4.2

School refusal/school phobia
refers to a syndrome that is recognised by an unwillingness to attend school, staying at home when not at school, parents who know and disapprove of their child's absences and emotional upset at the possibility of having to attend school (Mitchell & Shepard, 1980). School refusal essentially refers to anxiety based absenteeism. This form of absenteeism is widely associated with social and medical disorder involving persistant non-attendance at school, excessive anxiety and physical complaints (Bond, 2004). It is therefore quite different from other types of absenteeism given its psychological and/or medical composition (Cook and Ezenne, 2010).

4.3

Truancy

refers to when a student is voluntarily absent or not attending school without his parent's permission and knowledge. The truant leaves home under the pretence of going to school but turns away and gets involved in out-of-school activities (Cummingham, 2005). There are two types of truancy: chronic and occasional (Sommer, 1985). The former includes the frequent truants, while the latter includes instances where students are absent for only part of the day through missing classes and arriving late or leaving early (Bell et al., 1994; Bond, 2004). Research shows that there are severe implications of truancy, such as misbehaviour, failed courses and early dropouts (Balfanz et al., 2007). Truancy is believed to be a predictive marker for future behavioural and psychological problems. Therefore, preventing truancy is an essential component in the wellbeing of students (Malcolm, H. et al, 2003).

4.4

School Transience

occurs when a parent/carer unexpectedly withdraws a student from school without providing the school with contact or transfer details of the forwarding school.

4.5

Authorised non-attendance

occurs when a child is permitted to stay away from school for a variety of reasons, namely, sickness, medical and dental treatment, bereavement, domestic circumstances, religious observance, court appearances, weddings and travelling with the family in emergency situations.

Source: School Attendance Improvement Report (October 2005)

05

COLLEGE AND WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO ADDRESSING ATTENDANCE

In order for chronic absenteeism to be addressed effectively the responsibility of reducing school absenteeism is to be shared by all stakeholders involved, including all teaching and administrative school staff (College Principals, School Management Teams, Educators, etc) and Support Services. Addressing chronic absenteeism is a continuous process that involves understanding, identifying characteristics of chronically absent students, identifying interventions that target absenteeism patterns, applying and tracking interventions, assessing their effectiveness and adjusting accordingly (Sanchez, 2012). Whilst to date Education Social Workers work mainly on cases of absenteeism, the way forward necessitates a whole school approach, with educators assuming an active role in addressing non-attendance.

06

RELATED DOCUMENTS

Other related documents to this policy include:

School Attendance Improvement Report (MEYE, 2005)

A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta (MEDE, 2014)

Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014 - 2024 (MEDE, 2014)

Respect for All Framework (MEDE, 2014)

Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools (MEDE, 2014)

Managing Behaviour in Schools (MEDE, 2014)

07

OWNERS

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Director General – Directorate for Educational Services
Director General – Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
Director - Student Services
Director - Curriculum Management

08

REVIEW DATE

This document will be reviewed during August 2015.
You are encouraged to submit your feedback by the 30th April 2015,
via email on **r4af.mede@gov.mt**

09

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