“What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?”

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What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

**Abstract**

Declining student attendance at local, national, and global levels is a source of ongoing challenge for schools and school policy makers. The need to address this issue has been identified by various stakeholders such as parents, community members and media outlets. It is readily accepted among educators that high levels of student attendance are desirable, not only because when they are attained student learning performance is enhanced, but also for the many societal benefits that ensue when adolescents are actively engaged in productive pursuits. A literature review of available sources on this topic has identified key areas that have informed the theoretical basis for this study. Many of these could be addressed in practice in Queensland state secondary schools and beyond to support improved student attendance.

The challenge of overcoming declining student attendance rates is fundamentally one of systems: systems of beliefs and values within families and the community, and systems of communication and relationships between school and students’ homes. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provided the underpinning framework to conceptualise students’ school attendance and factors influencing it, with the view to helping schools improve attendance. Part A of this sequential, mixed methods study consists of a population level analysis of student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools, mapped against demographic data. Part A led to the selection of participants for Part B which consists of a series of case studies that identify the most effective strategies to improve student attendance, and the creation of a new model of student attendance improvement that can be applied across contexts. These outcomes are designed to contribute to educators’ efforts to improve student attendance in schools in Queensland, nationally and internationally.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Statement of Originality

"This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself."

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**List of Abbreviations and Initialisms**

ACARA .......................... Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ATAR ........................................................ Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
DET ......................................................... Department of Education and Training
DETE ..................................................... Department of Education, Training and Employment
EGPA ...................................................... Education (General Provisions) Act 2006
ICSEA ............................................... Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
INSA ................................................. International Network for School Attendance
NAO .......................................................... National Audit Office
NAPLAN ........................................ National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy
PBL .......................................................... Positive Behaviour for Learning
OP .............................................................. Overall Position
QATSIF ........................................ Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation
QCAA ................................................... Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority
QCE ........................................................ Queensland Certificate of Education
QCIA ..................................................... Queensland Certificate of Individual Attainment
SEAM … The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure
SEP ............................................................. Senior Education Profile
SWPBS ................................. School-wide Positive Behaviour Support
SWU ...................................................... Students whose Whereabouts are Unknown
YLC ............................................................. Year Level Coordinator
**Statement of Acknowledgement**

The process of undertaking and completing this research study has been an incredibly rewarding one. I have been challenged and humbled along the way, and I thank my support network.

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Six generous and high performing Principals gave their time willingly and generously to support the study. I thank them for their time and kind contribution. The work they do every day in supporting students in sometimes amazingly challenging circumstances is outstanding and I hope this paper does some justice to their enormous contribution to students and to education in Queensland. Thank you.

To Gianluca and Marielle, thank you for encouraging me to keep at this task when it proved difficult. Your optimism and support that I would complete this research study and thesis pushed me on.

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**Published journal article**


**Chapter 1. Introduction**

A quantitative study of rates of student attendance across Queensland state secondary schools was conducted, and based on that study, a qualitative analysis of six selected schools more deeply explored trends and patterns in both student attendance and the strategies and systems schools use to try to improve it. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was employed to analyse the complex interconnected systems that influence students’ willingness and ability to attend school. Based on what was learned, a novel systems-based model for use by school leaders and communities to improve student attendance is proposed.

The challenges that schools face in raising levels of student attendance are many and varied. School leaders and teachers face challenges stemming from family and student stressors that Freiberg et al., (2007) describe as significantly affecting student application to their daily learning program. Dufour et al., (2010) explain that the process of authentic engagement in learning requires students to be actively engaged in the experience of hands-on learning so that they may master the requisite skills. When students are absent from school their opportunities to engage in such learning experiences diminish, thus decreasing their chances of post-schooling success.

In Australian secondary schools, the average rate of student attendance is an ongoing concern. Decreasing student attendance rates in two Australian states, Western Australia and Queensland, resulted in Auditor General Reports being conducted and tabled to the respective parliaments (Office of the Auditor General Western Australia, 2015; Queensland Audit Office, 2012). Both reports detailed poor student attendance rates and, in many schools, negative gains despite the introduction of system-wide initiatives. Across all Australian states and territories, student attendance declines as students progress through secondary schooling (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2020), and this continues to be a concern for all educators.

This investigation of the research question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?” is primarily designed to contribute to the field of knowledge in this realm (Gottfried, 2013). The ultimate goal of the study though is to support every school that needs guidance on strategies to improve student attendance so that every young person goes to school and realises their potential. The existing literature is rich in depth relating to causes and reasons for poor patterns of attendance, and the resulting negative effects on student learning outcomes. However, detailed research into what successful schools actually do to improve student attendance is not readily available. In addition, models of practice to support school leader capability to improve student attendance are infrequent within the
1.1 Background - improved student attendance is desirable

Student attendance and absence is a challenge that has been studied extensively in Australia (Hancock et al., 2018; Justman & Peyton, 2018; Ladwig & Luke, 2014; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004; Mills et al., 2018; Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2016a; Rothman, 2002), in the United States (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, 2013; Gottfried, 2013; Hamlin, 2020; Harris, 2013; New York State, 2016; Sheldon, 2007), in the United Kingdom (Reid, 2008, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; C. Taylor, 2012), and across Europe (Garcia-Gracia, 2008; Gubbel et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2015; Ramberg et al., 2019). The depth of study and research across the world indicates that the challenge of improving student attendance is a shared international problem.

Patterns and rates of student school attendance is an extremely difficult challenge to address. The partnership between home, school and community is important (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), as is government and school policy and procedure implementation (Perry & McConney, 2010). Students who do not attend school regularly can be prone to a higher risk of dropping out of school early (Schoeneberger, 2012) and the negative effects of school absence on society can be measured in higher future related incarceration rates and significant economic cost to communities (Harris, 2013).

Taylor (2012) reports “… there is a clear link between poor attendance at school and lower academic achievement” (p. 1). The problem of student non-attendance is further described by Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) in explicit terms “…chronic absenteeism … acts like bacteria in a hospital, an unseen force that creates havoc with the academic health of our students” (p. 5). If the fundamental premise that students should be in school regularly is accepted, then all professionals within the education field should be equipped with strategies, skills, and resources to address the challenge when non-attendance becomes persistent.

1.2 Professional perspective

Presently, I am the Headmaster of an international college in Asia. The college educates non-native passport holder students (from expatriate families) from the ages of two to eighteen. The college is a fee paying, for-profit venture that aims to deliver a world class education to mobile families. A bespoke early years’ curriculum, a guided inquiry approach founded on the English National Curriculum, and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education then the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program are delivered to students. Joining from Australia,
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one of the interesting facets of this role to me is that student attendance and a focus on absence from school is not of significant concern to College leaders. Attendance data is not tracked, no targets are set, there is no investigation of student absence, it is just not an issue of concern nor conversation. Indeed, I share the following anecdote as an example of the difference in perspective. One of the first meetings I had upon commencement in the role was with the College Board of Trustees. One of them (a highly influential community business figure with a PhD) noted from my profile that I was writing a thesis on student attendance improvement and asked the direct question of me, “Is student school attendance a problem that needs addressing in other systems?” He was genuinely surprised that such a topic merited investigation. The conclusion I have drawn from leading in this context is that because families have the means to pay fees, they highly value education and all the associated social benefits that come with healthy daily, school interaction, students attend school as a matter of course unless they are ill. For the most part, a focus on needing to spotlight attendance improvement is not seen to be a concern, therefore not of interest. As a result, I have formed the belief that the need for improvement in practices in this domain in systems such as Queensland is even more urgent because many of the children whose futures are adversely affected because of poor attendance have no financial nor familial links to support them beyond the consequences.

As a school Principal of nearly thirteen years leading low socio-economic school communities in Queensland the issue of student attendance was always a challenge. Within my two previous school communities (for two years and four years respectively) and at previous schools (for five years and two years respectively), low rates of student attendance, in my opinion, hindered teacher efficacy and school tone. Students who displayed sporadic patterns of attendance were more likely to struggle to maintain a satisfactory learning trajectory, not follow school routines, and were over-represented in student disciplinary absence incidents (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013). I have clear memories of students who chose not to come to school, and my teams could not work out why. I recall other students who wanted to attend school, yet their family circumstances made it difficult, in some cases impossible. This could occur because of lack of family resources or due to lack of family will to support where required. Truancy was a concern in some schools, and this led my teams and I to reflect deeply on what type of a school climate we were providing to these students. I remember patterns of absence in the form of truancy that were linked to certain subjects and teachers, in essence, students were voting with their feet. I interacted with aggressive parents who vociferously and, in some cases, violently threatened my team and I if we sought to “push the issue” on their child’s non-attendance. At times, it was despair, and always, when success was attained, it was after long and stressful effort.
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The leadership colleagues I worked with and led, formed attendance teams, enacted threshold tracking and monitoring, used positive incentive programs, applied punitive consequences in the loss of non-essential privilege access, and engaged external partners to support families requiring transport, financial, dependency, and violence interventions. I met with officers from the government departments responsible for The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) trial, we read about the issue, I led workshops on student attendance across my school district, region and with interstate colleagues, I enacted my own devised student attendance improvement model (TLC, see Figure 11 on p. 153) and had some success (see below) and other failures. The complexity of the issue of student attendance was a constant for more than a decade of my leadership life, and the statistics of declining student attendance that exist today continue to concern me.

The student attendance rate when I was appointed at one school was an alarming 77 per cent. It was slated at the time to be the lowest student attendance rate in a non-Indigenous community school in Queensland. With enormous effort and the implementation of a range of intervention strategies over the course of five years, student attendance increased to 89 per cent. This was still not an acceptable rate of student attendance for a Queensland state secondary school, falling below the state average at the time which was 90.8 per cent (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2014), however, improvement was evident.

Another school that I led attained an attendance rate above the state average. An attendance rate of 93 per cent was achieved through the enactment of a range of targeted and specific strategies including weekly tracking of attendance patterns, improved pedagogy, the linking of student attendance to permission to participate in non-essential activities, and recognition through a broad range of celebration events to promote excellent attendance.

The experiences detailed above led me to develop a deep and unerring commitment to strive to modify student, community, and staff attitudes toward student attendance improvement strategies, and enact real change within the profession. This drive led me to conduct this research study with student attendance improvement as the focus. The rich conversations with professional colleagues who also faced the challenge of increasing student attendance supported my interest to contribute to the available knowledge on this topic.

1.3 Research question

This sequential, mixed methods research study consisted of two parts to answer the research question:
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

“What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?”

Underpinning the study’s focus on answering the research question is the theoretical framework of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). To support reader understanding of the application of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to aspects of the literature review and description of schooling in Queensland, a brief explanation of the theory is provided. Bronfenbrenner created a theory based on a series of nested structures to illustrate the levels or layers of a person’s development (see Figure 5 on p. 55). Level one is the **microsystem** which contains the interpersonal relationships, activities and experiences a young person is exposed to throughout their development. Level two is the **mesosystem** which refers to relationships between the contexts of the **microsystems**. Level three is the **exosystem** which refers to multiple settings that do not necessarily involve the developing person as a direct and active participant. Level four is the **macrosystem** which is the larger cultural context. The **chronosystem** is the fifth level that is concerned with the patterning of events and transitions throughout a person’s development.

The creation of a new student attendance improvement model enhances the pragmatic nature of the study’s approach as a contribution to the professional knowledge base and to complement the findings and discussion of the study. The intention to contribute to theory (Stemberger & Cencic, 2014) aligns to the chosen framework and methodology. A sequential, mixed methods design was best suited to answer the stated research question because while a stand-alone quantitative approach may have yielded satisfactory surface level findings, it would have proven insufficient alone (Henson, Hull & Williams, 2010) to address the complex, multi-layered challenge of improving student school attendance.

Part A is a large-scale quantitative population study of student attendance data for 208 Queensland state secondary schools. This part of the study acted as a sorting process (and first layer of data collection) to determine the sample schools that were targeted for Part B. The second part of the research study involved a series of semi-structured interviews and collation of publicly available school literature to identify coded references that were sorted into data-based content themes for discussion. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) levels were used as the framework for this analysis and discussion. The data-based content themes and the subsequent discussion formed the foundational basis to build a new student attendance improvement model. This research study seeks to add to the existing corpus of knowledge and provide a perspective on highly effective strategies that have improved student attendance in
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Queensland state secondary schools.

1.4 Research sub-questions
The sub-questions that formed the basis of Part A of this research study support investigation of the primary research question:

“What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?”

The sub-questions for Part A were:

1. Which Queensland state secondary schools recorded the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016?
2. What is the geographic and demographic profile of the schools with the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent attendance?

Answering the sub-questions above provided the preliminary data to form the sample group for further investigation during Part B of the study.

The sub-questions for Part B were:

1. How do schools track and monitor student attendance within the immediate school setting (the student’s microsystem)?
2. What strategies do schools employ to engage with students’ families?
3. How do schools engage and collaborate with their community (the student’s mesosystem and exosystem) to improve student attendance?
4. How do schools recognise and reward excellent student attendance (building cultural values within the student’s macrosystem)?
5. What other strategies do schools employ to improve student attendance?
Chapter 2. Literature Review

The following literature review explores contemporary research into student attendance in schools applying the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to develop coherence. When researching the question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?” a broad range of literature emerges. This literature review was constructed by exploring the local context within Queensland schooling, the Australian landscape, and the experience of global educators as detailed within international literature. Relevant doctoral dissertations addressing the topic of student attendance in schools have also been included in this review. The importance of student attendance in schools, and the issues that result from poor attendance, are reviewed and discussed, including the phenomenon of chronic absence. The distinction between school refusal and truancy is discussed and consistent themes for students with patterns of non-attendance found to be evident in the literature reviewed are presented and commented upon. These include decreased academic success, social issues, an increase in levels of non-attendance due to disciplinary absences, a poor perception of learning and the schooling experience, and bullying from other students. Alternatively, attendance strategies that have consistently proven successful in schools including development and enactment of attendance policies, regular tracking, and monitoring of patterns of attendance, the creation of a positive relationship with the local community, collaboration with parents (including during policy formulation), and early intervention are also be explored.

The introduction of high stakes comparable national testing (in particular, NAPLAN – the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy) and the subsequent spotlight on all school performance measures during the last decade has amplified the issue of student attendance in Australia. Jurisdictions and schools have become competitive with their counterparts as cohort and school performance against national measures (including results and attendance) are published in the media and on government endorsed sites such as MySchool, school websites and locally produced reports. Personal conversations I have held with peers reveals that school leaders are therefore mindful of the ramifications of not only actual poor school performance, but community perception of not performing at, or above, widely publicised benchmarks. Schools have always worked tirelessly to implement a wide range of measures to improve all aspects of school performance, including the complex, non-linear challenge of student attendance (Ledman & Kamuche, 2003). However, in the current social climate it is a more transparent challenge, thus markedly raising the accountability stakes.

Applying Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to the concept of schooling in contemporary society allowed several fundamental questions to emerge. Whilst
analysing schools in Part A of this study, the second sub-question relating to the demography of the schools became crucial. The immediate setting of the school and the influence of family and friends (the *microsystem*) on students’ habits and how this was influenced by the broader interconnections and indeed the local community (the *mesosystem* and *exosystem*) impacted on norms and patterns of behaviour. Furthermore, cultural expectations, beliefs, and values (the *macrosystem*) of a system or location required analysis to determine its relevance to the problem of whether students attended school regularly. To support this discussion, it was firstly prudent to examine different jurisdictional approaches to persistent non-attendance.

### 2.1 Chronic absence

Definitions within reviewed literature for “chronic absence” vary. Chang and Romero (2008) include “both excused and unexcused absences” (p. 3) in their description of the phenomenon. Conry and Richards (2018) describe chronic absence as “excessive absence, regardless of the reason or excuse” (p. 188). London et al., (2016) concur, referring to chronic absence as excessive non-attendance, evident for any reason. Other researchers have used numerical thresholds to define chronic absence. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) apply a baseline of 20 or more days. Arimas-Macalino et al., (2019), Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), Gottfried and Hutt (2019), Havik et al., (2015), Jordan (2019), and New York State (2016) apply the baseline of students having lost more than 10 per cent of the school year to be considered chronically absent. Common within the literature is the express understanding that chronic absence is not differentiated by reason. Within Australian states and territories, the definitions for what constitutes chronic absence either differs, is undefined, or is unclear.

In Queensland, the rate of absence that triggers action from a school is ambiguous. There is no specific definition for chronic absence. Rather, the school Principal determines when action is required, guided only by a guideline that intervention is required following three or more consecutive days of absence, if a persistent absence pattern is evident, or if attendance is reasonably considered unsatisfactory (Collingwood & Mazerolle, 2020). If a school Principal believes that a case meets any of these criteria, she/he may instigate a failure to participate process (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2016a). Victoria implements a process like Queensland and Principals enforce a school attendance notice process (Victoria State Government Education and Training, 2013) when they determine that a student’s absences are below a 90 per cent threshold. In Tasmania, different thresholds are used for different year levels. Up to grade ten, the sixth unauthorised absence (regardless of timeframe) requires intervention and, in years 11 and 12, the 16th unauthorised absence signals intervention is required (Collingwood & Mazerolle, 2020; Tasmania: Department of Education, 2016). In the Northern
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Territory guidelines to address persistent absence oblige Principals to enact compulsory procedures following five or more days absent within five weeks (Collingwood & Mazerolle, 2020). Additionally, in the Northern Territory chronic absenteeism relates to the effect absences are having on a student’s learning progress (Northern Territory Government: Department of Education and Training, 2011).

Western Australian school Principals are supported to provide intervention by an automated system that identifies students who fall into one of four attendance categories: 0-60% At Risk/Severe; 61-79% At Risk/ Moderate; 80-89% At Risk/Indicated, and 90+% (Hancock et al., 2013). In the Australian Capital Territory, official procedures are enacted following seven days of unexplained absence (ACT Government: Education and Training, 2011; Collingwood & Mazerolle, 2020). Similarly, in New South Wales the school Principal is required to intervene following seven days of unexplained absence, and then again once a student’s absences reach 30 days in 100 (New South Wales Department of Education and Communities, 2015). In South Australia, the threshold for school intervention is five days of absence per school term (Collingwood & Mazerolle, 2020).

2.2 Attendance challenges across the globe

In the United States of America each state enacts their own compulsory laws governing school attendance. The federal government does not stipulate that school attendance is compulsory, indeed the United States constitution prohibits a uniform, nationwide compulsory school attendance law (Reyes, 2020). In a review of every state’s policy on compulsory ages for schooling, Reyes (2020) identified that students in the United States are required to compulsorily attend school from ages varying from five to 18. The shortest period of compulsory education is nine years, and the longest 13 years. The youngest a child is eligible for free education is four years, and the oldest 22. Despite having compulsory attendance laws, ten states do not have policies or laws to address chronic absence, the remaining have a varying intervention requirement ranging from supportive rehabilitation actions to fines and/or prosecution (Reyes, 2020).

The complexity and challenge of addressing chronic absence can be caused by many different factors and common findings within a range of literature support that it is a multi-faceted issue. Many students who display chronic levels of absence have complex home situations and many suffer from illness or special education needs that require support. Conry and Richards (2018) reported that students with special education needs accounted for 17 per cent of all chronic absences within the United States, whilst only making up 12 per cent of the student population.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

London et al., (2016) discuss the over-representation of African American, Native American and Pacific Islander students alongside students with disabilities and those from low-income households in U.S. chronic absence data. They found that students with chronic absence in one recorded year went on to record chronic absenteeism in later years at much higher rates than their peers who demonstrated satisfactory attendance in the sample year. London et al., (2016) recommended that informal interventions left to Principals and teachers to apply were insufficient interventions for the type of chronic absence problems that they are regularly faced with. Students with long-term illness are over-represented in chronic absence data and Arimas-Macalino et al., (2019) discussed the benefits of early nursing intervention for students displaying chronic absence due to illness. Their findings that coordinated care and individualised nursing interventions reduce chronic absenteeism are relevant for school policy makers.

Heyne et al., (2019) provided insight into the differentiation between school attendance problems. They detailed that school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and school exclusion are different types of absence with different causes requiring different intervention responses. Klein et al., (2020) reported that socioeconomic factors of all dimensions are linked to overall school absences. Their findings include that urban schools suspend more students than rural schools, and that most historical studies had focussed on urban settings due to a belief that the prevalence of low-income, urban areas most negatively affected attendance. This discussion provides impetus for the scope of this research study which looks at schools in Queensland from all geographical locations.

Hancock et al., (2017) caution against ignoring high achieving students or those from more advantaged schools as these students too are not immune to the effects that low attendance rates can have on their achievement trajectory. This warning is appropriate given a goal of this study is to support all schools to build community-based cultures of attendance.

2.3 School refusal as distinct from truancy

Similar to understanding how chronic absence is viewed within and across jurisdictions, the terms school refusal and truancy are important ones to understand. One of the earliest researchers of the truancy phenomenon was Tyerman (1968) who defined truancy as absence from school without parent permission. More recently, Gentle-Genity et al., (2015) compiled truancy definitions from 19 states of the U.S.A. and one U.S. territory. They could not identify one consistent definition. They identified the key themes of unexcused, unapproved, not legitimate, or valid excuse during compulsory school, without parent approval/knowledge, and settled on creating their own definition: “truancy is a non-home school student’s act of non-attendance evidenced by missing
part or all of the school day without it being authorised by medical practitioner or sanctioned by parent(s) and/or legitimately excused by school or per state law” (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015, p. 78). Conry and Richards (2018) defined truancy as “the accumulation of unexcused absences in excess of those allowed by state law” (p. 188). Gottfried (2017) defined truancy as “missing school for unexcused reasons, that is reasons that do not pertain to health, emergencies, or other commitments” (p. 130).

A study focusing on the correlation of later school year absences with early school absences was conducted in the United States by Gottfried (2017). The study homed in on truancy from school, looking at truancy as both an unauthorised full day absence and a matter of unauthorised lateness to school (tardy), rather than all student absences. In the United States many jurisdictions have adopted the month of September as “attendance awareness month” (Attendance Works, 2020), designed to promote a strong attendance start to the school year to build habit and momentum for the remainder of the year. Gottfried’s (2017) study measured truancy and tardies of three years of attendance data from a school district in the United States. The results found that student truancy was (that is related to gender, educational need, income background, language background) and could not be predicted by patterns established earlier in the school year.

In other countries, studies have found disturbing patterns and outcomes for students who truant. Cabus and Dewitte’s (2015) study in the Netherlands found that students who truanted were 34.7 per cent more likely to drop out from school. Keppens and Spruyt (2018) researched the degree to which truancy rates varied across 24 European countries, and whether the differences and characteristics of these systems affected the truancy rates. Using PISA data from 2012 with control variables (gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status), they reported a relationship between truancy and gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. They found that boys, foreign background students and students from low socio-economic status were more likely to truant. They also found a strong relationship between truancy and early school leaving (dropout rates), and that truancy (also referred to as incremental disengagement) appears a good warning signal to identify students who are more likely to drop out of school. Likewise, Rocque et al., (2017) illustrated the cumulative nature of school absences. They also detailed that student truancy is an early warning signal to dropping out of school.

Mallett (2016) supported research that argues that truancy disproportionately impacts vulnerable and at-risk students, and that punitive, school-based measures harms these students rather than helps them. Mallet (2016) recommended school leaders and teachers should move away from zero tolerance policies in a study that compared Ohio state’s zero tolerance policy with Colorado
state’s reformatory approach. Mallet (2016) contended that Ohio’s approach was outdated and ineffective in that it required repeat truants to be treated as offenders within the court system, contrasted with Colorado’s approach that required a coordinated school, parent and community service treatment plan to be attempted before a truancy filing could be made with courts. Mallet (2016) advocated for a rehabilitation framework to be applied to student truancy cases based on evidence-based practices.

In New Zealand, Baskerville and Loveridge (2020) defined truancy as “student absence from schools without explanation, or satisfactory explanation to the Principal” (p. 2). Students reported that they truanted due to disrespect in the form of perceived social injustice arising from peer and teacher actions towards them. They also reported bullying from other students as a reason to affect their attitudes to attendance. Other factors that increased absence were students’ desire to be with friends, to be alone, or as an habitual act. Baskerville and Loveridge (2020) referenced student voice as a crucial factor in formulating solutions to the challenge of truancy. They contended that an understanding of student motivation to non-attendance and their thoughts on what a positive school environment looked like supported increased student attendance. Ramberg et al., (2019) studied truancy in Stockholm, Sweden, and found a theme that aligned to Baskerville and Loveridge (2020). They reported that a high student perception of a positive ethos in the school and of high-quality school leadership led to lower levels of truancy in sample schools.

Kearney and Bates (2005) discuss a wide range of school refusal behaviours, providing suggestions for educational professional to avoid the negative outcome of “a student’s refusal to attend school or difficulty in remaining in classes for an entire day” (p. 207). The distinction between student attendance for a full day or for lessons within a day is important because the reason for a student’s behaviour as distinct from one or the other can greatly differentiate the required response for intervention. Not all truancy is school refusal, and not all school refusal is truancy. For example, a student may happily attend school for a morning session then choose to truant afternoon lessons that they perceive as uninviting, not stimulating or which may trigger an anxiety reaction. On the other hand, a school refuser would be more likely to not attend at all until the conditions causing their unwillingness to attend were addressed.

Galle-Tessonneau and Heyne (2020) described school refusal as being characterised by strong negative emotions toward school or the prospect of having to attend school. They summarised the main factors that are represented in school refusal cases: reluctance, severe difficulty in attending school, preferring to stay home with family for personal security or emotional comfort reasons, experiencing emotional distress or unexplained physical symptoms when expected to attend
school, serious antisocial tendencies, and parental awareness of the problem without achievement of successful intervention. The cause of the emotions that lead to school refusal can include anxiety, depression, and physical complaints (Wimmer, 2010). Anxiety manifests in several forms including separation anxiety (most common in younger children), social/performance anxiety (occurs when students fear humiliation, bullying or judgment by peers), and generalised anxiety disorder (anxiety that exceeds normal student concern about their own self, or in the form of much more serious disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder) (Wimmer, 2010). Students suffering from depression display mood disorders, difficulty in mixing with peers, risk taking behaviours, and in extreme cases death or suicide ideation (Wimmer, 2010). Students who display physical complaints are characterised by the presence of physical symptoms that are not explained by a medical condition (Wimmer, 2010). Often students in this category will request leave from class to visit the school nurse, or complain about symptoms on a regular, almost daily, basis (Wimmer, 2010).

Prabhuswamy (2018) argued that “school refusal is a symptom and not a syndrome or a diagnosis” (p. 1117). He asserted that the term has become common in usage because it is comprehensive and describes the nature of the problem in an understandable way. The treatment and management of school refusal is complex and should be addressed within an early intervention, collaborative, team approach (Kearney & Bates, 2005; Prabhuswamy, 2018) designed to remove obstacles and blockages preventing positive student engagement with school. Ingul and Havik (2018) concur, emphasising the preventative benefits of early intervention, finding that successful addressing of emerging school refusal can stop more serious, difficult to arrest school refusal behaviours from establishing. Sergejeff et al., (2019) published a guide to support school attendance improvement as part of a project in Finland.

The Finnish project resource titled “School Refusal” supports school staff with a bank of resources and advice to support practitioners addressing the attendance challenge (Sergejeff et al., 2019). The resource lists common warning signs including increased incidences of unexcused absences or tardiness, difficulty in returning from school holidays, absences when assessment is occurring, frequent and increasing medical concerns, continuously contacting home during the school day, and increasing physical symptoms. Sergejeff et al., (2019) stress the importance of positive school culture in supporting students and families to overcome school refusal and offer online learning suggestions for students yet to overcome their refusal. Trauma, bullying, and grieving a death are also detailed to increase a student’s chance of refusing to attend school (Sergejeff et al., 2019). The importance of taking early, preferably immediate, action is supported by Jordan (2019), Sergejeff et al., (2019), and Wimmer (2010).
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

In Finland, Virtanen et al., (2021) adopted a unique approach to the attendance challenge posed by truants and school refusers, by analysing initial levels of student attendance then measuring changes in student engagement throughout the primary school to upper secondary school journey. They then looked at whether student levels of cynicism mediated these relationships. Their findings reported that when students’ affective and behavioural ties (lower levels of cynicism) with a school were strengthened, school engagement and attendance increased. This study has implications for all school leaders and teachers as it described the positive effect of using incentive to ensure that students are meaningfully connected to their schooling experience with feelings of trust and confidence.

2.4 Creating a new student attendance improvement model

One of the opportunities presented from this study of effective strategies that improve student attendance was the creation of a proposed model of practice. Within Part B of the research study a proposed model of practice was developed using the learnings from the leaders from the schools identified during Part A. A key measure of success of Part B of this research study was the creation of a new student attendance improvement model. The presence of an element of “theory building” (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012, p. 16) within the research study was included to contribute to school leader and policy maker professional learning and professional practice. To guide the drafting of a proposed student attendance improvement model literature themes from this review were used to capture excellent practice. These key strategies detailed in the review formed the foundational thinking for the new model, alongside an existing model I had created for my own student attendance improvement work in the schools I had led.

2.5 Student certification and achievement in Queensland state secondary schools

Students in Queensland secondary schools (state and independent) work towards attainment of the graduating qualification called the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), or the Queensland Certificate of Individual Attainment (QCIA) (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018b). The attainment of senior graduating qualifications is recorded on each student’s Senior Education Profile (SEP) (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018b). The QCE is an internationally recognised high school graduation qualification and is attained after successful completion of certification including meeting a core component pattern of study, minimum literacy and numeracy requirements, and attainment of a minimum point score (20 QCE points) through completion of school subjects, vocational training certificates, or other recognised study banked into an individual student’s online learning account. Although attainment of the QCE is possible beyond secondary school through multiple pathways,
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

the usual mode of attainment of the QCE is by meeting the minimum requirements across the two-year period of year 11 and 12 in a Queensland secondary school. Some students with special consideration access a three-year pathway and the attainment of points for certification can occur up to the age of 24. The QCIA is a certificate that reports the achievements of students with learning impairments or difficulties. It is a record of learning summarising the skills and knowledge attained over a student’s 12-year education history.

During the period of the sample study, students graduating from Queensland secondary schools could also attain an Overall Position (OP) score (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018a). The OP score was a ranking of a student’s overall achievement in their school subjects and was ranked from 25 (lowest score) to 1 (highest score). The OP score was used to rank order students for offers to university entrance and was in existence in Queensland secondary schools from 1992 until 2019. In 2020 the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) was introduced to Queensland secondary schools to align with other Australian states utilising this system to rank order students for university offers (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2020). The ATAR is a number between 0.00 (lowest score) and 99.95 (highest score) that indicates a student's position relative to their peers across the state in their year level. The QCE and QCIA remain in place alongside the ATAR score.

Alongside growth in student enrolment (an increase of 2961 students within the period of the study), attainment of the QCE and QCIA qualifications has been growing over the last decade and consistent with this trend, across the three years of the study grew year on year (see Table 1 below). Between 92 and 96 per cent of students who left Queensland schools during 2014-2016 graduated with either the QCE or QCIA, and whilst this study is not analysing attendance against achievement it is of note to observe the graduating certification trends during the period of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>QCEs issued (n)</th>
<th>QCIA issued (n)</th>
<th>SEPs issued (n)</th>
<th>% SEPs issued including a QCE or QCIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>45 692</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>50 071</td>
<td>92.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>47 762</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>50 091</td>
<td>96.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>48 653</td>
<td>877</td>
<td>51 605</td>
<td>95.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016)
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

2.6 Student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools

Across all Australian states and territories, student attendance declines as students progress through secondary schooling (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020). In Queensland in 2019, for all state schools (primary and secondary schools) the average rate of attendance (see Table 2 below) was 90.5 per cent and in state secondary schools it was 88.5 per cent (Queensland Department of Education, 2019a). Despite a strong focus on attendance improvement policy within the last decade (central to this period is the three years of focus for this study) including through the Every day counts (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2016a) initiative, attendance rates have not increased (Queensland Department of Education, 2019a; Queensland Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, 2014). Since the inception of the Every day counts initiative in 2008, “… strategies and initiatives to improve student attendance state-wide have not been effective” (Queensland Audit Office, 2012, p. 1). Given that in the ensuing decade attendance rates have in real terms gone backwards (see Table 2 below) (Queensland Department of Education, 2019a), the challenge clearly remains.

Table 2 Average rate of attendance in all Queensland state schools and state secondary schools (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average rate of attendance in Queensland state schools (%)</th>
<th>Average rate of attendance in Queensland state secondary schools (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>91.1</td>
<td>89.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six-year average</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Queensland Department of Education, 2019a; Queensland Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, 2014)

The concern has grown to the extent that during the last decade several actions have been implemented in Queensland by the Department of Education and Training to understand the issue and to seek solutions. A Queensland Audit Office report (2012) contained recommendations that wide and sustained application of effective strategies had not been achieved across the state, and the gap between Indigenous student attendance rates and all student attendance rates had not been closed and did not appear close to being closed. The report detailed that more needed to be done to follow up on absence of students. The report was not a complimentary description of the state of student
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

... or management of student attendance in Queensland schools.

The Queensland Audit Office report (2012) was followed by the *Performance Insights: School Attendance* (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013) report that sought to act as a “… comprehensive background paper for departmental staff regarding trends and issues in student attendance in Queensland state schools” (p. 2). This report contained advice for schools that effective strategies included communicating regularly to students and parents about the value of school attendance (and the long-term cost of non-attendance), engaging with students and families about factors that can be influenced, and addressing factors at school that impact on student engagement (The Queensland Audit Office report, 2012). In 2015, the Department of Education and Training conducted a large-scale survey (300 targeted Principals) of school practice that was released as *Performance insights. School attendance strategies: A result of a survey of Queensland state school leaders* (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2016b). This report highlighted some of the most effective strategies implemented to improve student attendance yet continued to share that limited progress had been made to address this problem. The report contained a recommendation that schools implement three suggested strategies to lift student attendance rates. These were: communicate expectations, holistic approach, and target support for students with low attendance.

Additionally, this report was a response to the Queensland Parliament, Parliamentary Committees (2014) published review of state school attendance rates. This review made several recommendations that supported further investigation of state schooling attendance rates. Recommendation #9 (Queensland Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, 2014) led to a University of Queensland study of attendance rates and strategies in Queensland state schools (Mills et al., 2018). This study comprised of a research team identifying 50 Queensland state schools demonstrating improved student attendance. Interviews with either the Principal of the 50 schools, or their proxy, were conducted to select a final 10 schools to complete comprehensive case studies on.

Findings from this study (Mills et al., 2018) included the need for schools to develop common attendance related terminology and definitions, to enact a comprehensive approach to attendance improvement, and to implement strategies to make every day at school count. This report (Mills et al., 2018) is the most comprehensive analysis of Queensland state school attendance located within the literature and is a complementary resource to this study.

Within the Queensland Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 (Queensland Government,
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

2018a), the EGPA, and the associated Department of Education and Training policies within *Every day counts* (Queensland Department of Education, 2016a), the roles and responsibilities for schools, and for the system and parents/caregivers are described. From the commencement of compulsory schooling at the age of six years and six months until the age of 16 (or the completion of year 10), by law children must be enrolled as a student in a Queensland school. Furthermore, students must be either engaged in work or other formal education until the age of 17 years. A range of resources to encourage attendance at school and to guide the follow-up on student absence are provided within the department’s *Every day counts* (Queensland Department of Education, 2016a) literature. These strategies and resources range from videos and posters depicting positive messages about regular attendance to step-by-step guides on how to enforce the compulsory schooling obligation of parents/caregivers. Schools are encouraged to formulate attendance polices and to engage with their communities to forge productive partnerships (Queensland Department of Education, 2016a).

All Queensland state schools are required to report on their attendance rates in their School Annual Report which must be published annually online (school website) by June 30. The student attendance distribution section of the report (see example in Figure 1 below) illustrates in graphical form the percentage of students in distribution bands of attendance rates. The bands are 0% to <85% represented by red to indicate a low rate of attendance, 85% to <90% represented by yellow to indicate a warning level of attendance, 90% to <95% represented by light green to indicate acceptable rate of attendance, and 95% to 100% represented by green to indicate good attendance.

![Student attendance distribution](image)

*Figure 1 Student attendance distribution (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2015)*

The example in Figure 1 above details an example Queensland school’s attendance pattern for the three years of the research study. The proportion of students in distribution bands by percentage
are shown for each year. Across the three years the school maintained a consistent level of students in the lowest distribution band (0% to <85%), respectively from 2014 to 2016, 20, 18, and 18 per cent. At the other end of the distribution bands the school increased its percentage of students in the green, 95% to 100% attendance rate by six percentage points (respectively from 2014-2016, 40, 44, and 46 per cent).

A further internal monitoring mechanism titled *School Performance Profile* contains the student attendance distribution graph replicated, however with the addition of the state average attendance rates illustrated below the school rates for the purpose of comparison. Principals use this data set to analyse school performance and determine targets for school improvement. The *School Performance Profile* is not for distribution, nor is it published.

It is evident that whilst the Queensland state government has implemented a range of interventions in the forms of surveys, reports, and broad campaigns to create effective conditions within the *macrosystem* and *exosystem* for students to attend school regularly, a disconnect remains within the *mesosystems* and *microsystems* that students experience. This disconnect is contributing towards attendance rates that continue to be below acceptable standards.

### 2.7 Student attendance in Australian schools

Prior to federation in 1901, between 1872 and 1895, the colonies of Australia independently introduced legislative education frameworks (Shorten, 1996). These acts of legislation provided compulsory, free, and secular education for children. Education departments that governed and administered education in the colonies also emerged during this period. After the turn of the century and the advent of Australian states, independent schooling in the form of Catholic and other Christian faith-based schools grew, and throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century education responsibility remained with the states. As the twentieth century ended, and the independent school sector grew, funding models evolved to reflect federal government allocation of finances to states and the models of education delivery and funding that we experience today emerged (Shorten, 1996).

Whilst the federal government of Australia provides funding to state and territory governments, the responsibility of administering education lies with each state and territory. Compulsory schooling expectations are consistent in many ways across the states and territories, although some differences in both policy and application are evident. All states and territories share the expectation in law that students remain in formal education or employment until at least 17 years of age (The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, ACARA, 2020), with
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

commencement ages varying from five years in Tasmania, to five and a half years in Western Australia, and six years in the other states and territories.

Unique strategies to support the active engagement of students in their schooling exist across Australian jurisdictions. In Western Australia, the names of students whose whereabouts are unknown (SWU list) is used to appropriate support (The Government of Western Australia: Department of Education, 2015). Australian Capital Territory schools are given prescriptive codes and recording marks to make on student rolls so that accuracy of practice is attained across the system (ACT Government: Education and Training, 2011). In other states, such as Queensland, a variety of third-party attendance monitoring systems are used in schools which apply their own recording codes. The definition of habitually absent (New South Wales Department of Education and Communities, 2015), constituting being absent 30 school days in every 100, in a New South Wales public school allows school leaders to be prescriptive in their expectations of students and their families. This small snapshot of differing practices alerts one to the fact that student absence, and the resulting need to improve student attendance, is a challenge all schools across the country are facing.

From 2014 to 2019 Australian schools reported declines in their reported attendance rates. Rates of attendance reported on the ACARA (2021) publicly available website measure student attendance in compulsory phases of schooling across Australia so the year levels of one to ten are reported upon, alongside separate reports of years one to six, and years seven to ten (see table 3 below). The overall national attendance rate for this demographic in 2019 decreased to 91.4 per cent, down from 92.7 per cent in 2014. Indeed, over the last two years stark individual state decreases are evident, including New South Wales, 92.2 per cent (2018) to 91.7 per cent (2019), Victoria, 92.7 per cent (2018) to 92.0 per cent (2019), and Queensland, 91.5 per cent (2018) to 91.1 per cent (2019). This sample of data from the three largest states by population indicates that the negative trends evident throughout most of the previous decade for student attendance across the nation in all reported domains are not moving in the right direction.

Table 3 Average rate of attendance for all Australian students, students in years one-six and students in years seven-ten (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average rate of attendance for Australian students in years 1-10 (%)</th>
<th>Average rate of attendance for Australian students in years 1-6 (%)</th>
<th>Average rate of attendance for Australian students in years 7-10 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>89.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Primary School Attendance</th>
<th>Secondary School Attendance</th>
<th>Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>91.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ACARA, 2021)

All states and territories in Australia also report a decline in attendance between primary school students and secondary school students (ACARA, 2021). Between secondary school students (reported as students in years 7-10) and primary school students (reported as students in years 1-6), the Australian average attendance rate for 2019 differed by 2.5 per cent (89.9 per cent to 92.4 per cent). Examples of the disparity in attendance rates between primary school students and secondary school students in Australia include the Australian Capital Territory (primary school average of 92.4 per cent compared to secondary school average of 89.0 per cent), Tasmania (primary school average of 92.4 per cent compared to secondary school average of 88.3 per cent), and South Australia (primary school average of 92.2 per cent compared to secondary school average of 90.0 per cent). These publicly reported attendance rates (ACARA, 2020) provide further evidence that support for schools with student attendance improvement is required.

**SEAM – The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure**

One of the most unique and, in many ways, controversial attempts to improve student attendance in Australia in recent times was The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM), an initiative introduced by the federal government in 2009 (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Human Services, 2014). The measure had two goals: to ensure that school aged children were enrolled in school; and to improve school attendance. SEAM linked student non-enrolment and poor attendance at school to the possible suspension of family welfare payments by the government department responsible for administering them. In a sense, this measure was designed to directly influence students’ *microsystems* by imposing penalties on families who were not otherwise meeting a system defined standard of attendance or engagement of their own volition. By enforcing interconnectedness between the *mesosystem* (the school Principal, support agencies, and the government department) on the student’s prevailing experience within their existing *microsystem* through sanctions, it was intended to ensure that students improved their attendance.

SEAM was initially trialled in the Northern Territory and then expanded to a small number of Queensland schools (30) to test its impact (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet,
Department of Human Services, 2014). Families who failed to provide information that their child was enrolled in, or regularly attending, school as per the compulsory laws of the jurisdiction, could be compelled to attend a support conference. If the child was still not enrolled in school, or the child’s attendance did not improve, then a warning notice could be issued. Ultimately, family welfare payments would be suspended if the child remained unenrolled or habitually absent from school. Most of the locations identified as requiring the level of support that SEAM offered were in remote, predominantly Indigenous, low-socio economic communities in the Northern Territory and in urban, low-socio economic, and remote Indigenous communities in Queensland.

Findings detailed that the threat of family welfare payment suspension initially positively impacted not only student attendance, but also engagement and interaction between families and schools, however long-term evaluation found no sustained attendance improvement (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Human Services, 2014). As the Principal at one of the Queensland trial schools, my anecdotal observation is that the increase in engagement of families who previously avoided communication or interaction with the school was certainly a positive aspect of the trial. This interaction reflected a new interplay between important elements of the students’ microsystem and, again, represents the complex nature of the challenge of improving student attendance. A personally challenging factor was carrying the responsibility to refer families to a process that could ultimately lead to their temporary loss of income. In 2012, the trial was concluded in Queensland schools and did not continue. However, SEAM continues as an initiative in the Northern Territory until the end of 2017 when its operation was ceased by the federal government.

**Indigenous student attendance in Australia**

A strong focus on the challenges educators face in attaining and maintaining satisfactory levels of student school attendance in Indigenous communities is evident in Australian studies. Over recent decades, several researchers (Bourke et al., 2000; Bereford & Gray, 2002; Ehrich et al., 2010; Ladwig & Luke, 2014; Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017) have sought to understand the reasons why large numbers of Indigenous students do not attend school regularly and what the impact of non-attendance has on student results. A consistent theme emerging from the literature is that whilst deep analysis of the reasons for, and of the impact of school non-attendance, little progress in the way of consistent and widespread improvement in student school attendance rates has been documented. For this purpose, it was critical to include Indigenous student numbers as a demographic measurement when determining the independent variables applied during Part A of this study (see Part A – Statistical analysis of student attendance rates and analysis of multiple factors).
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Analysis of Indigenous student attendance measured against non-Indigenous student attendance across Australia from 2014 to 2019 provides concerning findings (see Table 4 below). ACARA (2021) reports a decline in attendance for both cohorts but the lower base that Indigenous students started from (83.5 per cent compared to non-Indigenous students at 93.2 per cent) was extremely concerning to start with. Six years later Indigenous student attendance is now at 81.5 per cent which a two-percentage point decrease. Non-Indigenous student attendance has also declined but comparatively by only one point two percentage points to 92 per cent. At no point over the six-year period has attendance stabilised or increased, then declined. Both data sets have steadily declined which is a troubling trend for educators and policy makers to seek to address.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average rate of attendance for Australian indigenous students in years 1-10 (%)</th>
<th>Average rate of attendance for Australian non-indigenous students in years 1-10 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>93.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>93.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>93.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ACARA, 2021)

Concluding that policy formulation needed to consider the unique requirements of Indigenous families as separate to the remainder of the population, Beresford and Gray (2002) studied Indigenous student attendance in Perth schools. Using a qualitative methodology well-suited to developing trust and connection with families, Beresford and Gray (2002) conducted questionnaires and interviews with representatives from service providers who worked closely with the families of interest. The consistent message from service providers was they felt that “… service provision remains largely reactive, under-resourced, uncoordinated and fragmented” (Beresford & Gray, 2002, p. 40). The issue of policy formulation and the absolute necessity that paternalistic approaches are not revisited is supported by Taylor (2010) who reported that peer isolation in Indigenous early childhood education is a major cause of non-attendance and requires attention to make young Aboriginal students feel welcome at, and connected to, school.

A pilot study program conducted by Ehrich et al., (2010) over three terms in three Northern Territory Indigenous schools established a strong and positive correlation between connection to
school, attendance, and early literacy acquisition \((\text{microsystem} \ \text{interaction})\). The findings of Ehrich et al., (2010) concurred with Taylor (2010) in that connectedness to school, and a sense of belonging, was central to student success and ongoing consistent attendance. The themes of belonging and connectedness align to the premise of stability that can enhance student success.

Student mobility can reduce student connectedness to school and can negatively impact attendance. J. Taylor’s (2012) statistical analysis from census data analysed the effect of Indigenous student mobility on attendance at school. Short term mobility has proven to be higher among Indigenous families and their children due to a range of cultural factors that are not present in other Australian family demographics. These include loss of housing, travel for sorry business, and other family responsibility. J. Taylor (2012) sought to initiate a conversation on how educators with Indigenous populations can respond to student mobility and challenged the notion that mobility alone explains poor patterns of attendance among Indigenous families. In fact, J. Taylor (2012) found that larger numbers of Indigenous families were predominantly sedentary, therefore other factors require investigation as causes for non-attendance among these families. Again, little in the way of solution to arrest poor patterns of attendance was provided.

Not unlike J. Taylor’s (2012) study that included detail on unique Indigenous mobility issues, Jorgensen (2012) contributed a discussion article drawing on her own experiences in remote Indigenous communities. Citing student perception of curriculum relevance, high rates of teacher turnover, and cultural practices as causes for student absences, Jorgensen (2012) also linked poor student attendance to a negative impact on teacher morale which affected student performance, results, and thus motivation to attend. This effect highlights the bidirectional nature of the relationship between the systems that students exist within. Similar to Jorgensen (2012), over a decade previously Bourke et al., (2000) outlined the absolute importance of how negative school-based factors (disengaging lessons, unpleasant teachers, and distressing relations with teachers) affect the motivation and inclination of Indigenous students to attend classes. Purdie and Buckley (2010) stressed the importance of schools acknowledging their role in supporting students to view their learning environment (the \text{microsystem} of the school) as an integral part of the broader community, ensuring connectedness between the two.

Ladwig and Luke (2014) completed a quantitative study analysing the relationship between student attendance and academic achievement in sample Indigenous schools. Looking at this problem from the angle of sufficiency, Ladwig and Luke (2014) found in their sample no positive relationship was evident between student attendance and academic achievement. Ladwig and Luke (2014) stressed that attendance alone did not guarantee academic success, and that factors
such as the quality of teaching that students experience is as strong a determinant in student outcomes. This study challenges the notion that attendance equals success. It poses questions around teaching quality, curriculum delivery and pedagogy strategies, and how they positively impact on student learning success. However, as with previous studies, no guidance nor direction was provided on how to improve declining or failing attendance rates.

More recently, Baxter and Meyers (2019) sought to research and analyse the data collection methods utilised to identify and improve Indigenous student attendance. Collecting Indigenous student attendance data over a full school year, and analysing collection practices across the nation, Baxter and Meyers (2019) found that there is still no fully accurate measure whereby this important data is captured. This then creates a further problem within an already challenging aspect of public and national policy. Across Australia, including Queensland, a range of measures have been introduced to support Indigenous student attendance and learning. Closing the Gap, the Remote School Attendance Strategy, the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial, the SEAM trial, and the Smarter Schools National Partnership (Queensland Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, 2014) have all contributed to seeking to advance the Indigenous student attendance agenda without sustained success.

The sample of studies discussed shines a spotlight on some issues that Indigenous school communities experience when seeking to improve student attendance. It is evident from the studies reviewed that the prevailing culture of a student’s microsystem greatly impacts their capability to regularly attend school and any measure that has been effective, even in small measure, has paid close cultural attention to supporting familial understanding of the benefits of schooling. Prout Quicke and Biddle (2017) described how few policies and targets have been developed in partnership with Indigenous peoples. They noted that schools must consider the past negative experiences that Indigenous parents may have had with schooling and how these experiences may have resulted in them possibly being lacking in the skills or confidence to interact with the schools. Initiatives that have sought to link increased family capacity with support through the mesosystem (in essence the interconnected microsystems) have proven to be more successful than superficial measures imposed from further afield (the exosystem and macrosystem). Interconnectedness between the four levels appears to be the best way to achieve long-term behavioural change that can be viewed within the chronosystem. In stating this though, the challenge to increase student attendance in Indigenous communities remains a very real issue on the Australian social and political landscape.

2.8 Challenges for students and schools when facing patterns of non-attendance
As far back as the 1970’s researchers began to conduct in-depth investigations around the problems associated with declining student school attendance. Following a study throughout the early and mid-1970’s, Wright (1978) published findings related to the impact staff age and school culture had on student attendance patterns. Brokowski and Dempsey’s (1979) research detailed the challenges of creating a positive learning experience for students and drew links between attendance and performance. Brokowski and Dempsey (1979) also described differences in attendance patterns related to student age and ability. Their recommendation that curriculum delivery and the influence on student attendance of teaching methods be considered to address attendance issues set a path that future researchers have followed. The cost of student absenteeism to the community and the individual was emphasised by Reid (2008) who detailed the harm done to oneself in relation to diminished life opportunities borne from lack of education, and the expensive and time-consuming effort that systems bear from continued low student attendance rates. Reviewed literature across the past two decades, within Australia and globally, delivers several consistent themes that have been organised under the categories of home factors and school factors.

**Home factors – the primary microsystem**

**Social issues**

Schools that embrace positive school, family, and community partnerships are more likely to develop robust and resilient graduates who can effectively function and thrive in adult social situations (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The inverse can also prove to be true. When a school has failed to adequately engage a student and their family (a disconnect between the microsystem and mesosystem) and the student’s attendance is poor or sporadic, that student can be at risk to go on to become an adult who struggles to develop worthwhile and productive personal relationships (Schoeneberger, 2012). Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) described chronic absenteeism as being like a tax on a community’s ability to provide a pathway from school to successful adulthood. Robinson et al., (2018) detailed how student academic outcomes can be predicted from kindergarten attendance patterns. Robinson et al., (2018) reinforced Rothman’s (2002) previous findings that student school absence begins in late primary school and is a difficult pattern to arrest once negative attendance habits are established.

As the cycle of absence continues and student results decline, the chances of adult success can diminish. Reid (2005b) described the cycle of adult economic failure that can stem from failure at school as being almost impossible to break once it is established. This cycle can be extremely damaging for communities because even as people proceed through the various stages of their life and engage with many and varied influences (an evolving chronosystem), if early development is
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inadequate, socially unacceptable behaviours and patterns of engagement can unfortunately remain the same. Schoeneberger’s (2012) and Zubrick’s (2014) findings concurred with Reid (2005b) explaining how patterns of low attendance heighten chances of not only dropping out of school but also to being linked to low paying jobs. The correlation between frequent absenteeism and heightened chances of serious sociological issues in adulthood is outlined by Gottfried (2010; 2013) who elaborated on the higher possibility of experiencing abject hardship when adults who did not regularly attend school attempt to secure meaningful employment. The importance of identifying poor patterns of attendance and subsequent application of early intervention can prevent the realisation of potential adverse life outcomes because once patterns are established, they are very hard to change (Brenner, 2011; Hamlin, 2020; Schoeneberger, 2012; Rothman, 2002; The Smith Family, 2018;). Both Chang and Romero (2008) and Olson (2014) detail how crucial the first month of the school year is in arresting sporadic attendance, as once habits are formed, they are very difficult to reverse.

Child poverty is discussed by Zhang (2003) as a contributing factor in increased school absenteeism. It was reported that student attendance in secondary schools was less affected by cycles of family poverty than for their primary school counterparts. Addressing issues of poverty with external support agencies can decrease the impact on children, and their access to school and is a key recommendation of Zhang’s (2003) study. Reyes (2020) reported similar patterns of increased levels of low attendance among students from low-income households, explaining that among reasons for absence, family commitments to care for siblings or ill relatives is a significant factor.

Rocque et al., (2017) linked “long-lasting associations with negative life outcomes” (p. 592) not only to school absence, but specifically to truancy. They detailed adults who had demonstrated patterns of truancy at school were more likely to participate in non-violent crime in adulthood. Alarmingly, Rocque et al., (2017) referred to the “school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 593), that is evident in communities in the United States who have not successfully addressed school truancy issues. Rocque et al., (2017) recommended that efforts to reduce truancy be a key focus of educational systems.

For society to avoid having generations of mal-adjusted adults (with social issues as described above), Havik et al., (2015) claim that attention to attendance patterns must be a priority. School as an element of the microsystem is detailed to play such a pivotal role in children’s and adolescents’ personal and educational development (Havik et al., 2015), and any absence due to legitimate or disciplinary absences must be analysed and acted upon.
Parent sanctioned absences

A finding that consistently recurs within the reviewed literature is that parent sanctioned absence is a significant determinant in increasing student non-attendance in schools. McConnell and Kubina (2014) explained that this is a difficult problem to counter, yet an important one to tackle, as involving families in the education of their children is mostly cost-neutral and can create habits of punctuality and attendance that benefit the child throughout their life. In short, if the primary microsystem issues of influence can be addressed early then benefits will flow throughout the child’s life. Taylor (2012) compiled a report on attendance in the United Kingdom that illustrated how parent sanctioned absence grows as students age, and to combat this schools need to shift their focus from targeting unexplained absences to focusing on purely decreasing the overall numbers of absences, explained or otherwise. Gentle-Genitty et al., (2020), Kearney et al., (2019a) and Reid (2008) concur with C. Taylor (2012) asserting that attempts by schools to focus on separating authorised or unauthorised absences is at best unhelpful, and in any event absence results in the student not being in place to learn.

Parent perception of school-based issues such as bullying, teacher attitude and performance, and peer pressure can lead parents to decide that these are valid reasons to withhold children from attending school (Davies & Lee, 2006; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017). Conversely, teachers believed that students’ parents and their home environment were the most relevant factors affecting non-attendance at school. Indeed, in his study of school staff in Wales, Reid (2007) found “… eighty-one per cent of Head Teachers believed that parents condoning their children’s absence was the most serious issue in the management of school attendance” (p. 32). A distinction that exists between primary and secondary school non-attendance was noted by Lauchlan (2003) who reported that parents of school refusers in secondary school are usually aware of their child’s pattern of absence. Perry et al., (2019) explained how many parents underestimate the negative effect absences have on student attainment. Redressing the disconnect between home and school (within the mesosystem) increases a school’s chances of maximising student attendance. The complexities of this challenge are expanded upon by both Tamiru and Belachew (2017) and Vellos and Vadeboncoeur (2015) who detailed issues of food insecurity and the myriad of commitments that young people have in modern society that impact upon their attendance at school. These commitments include having part time jobs, participating in family activities and sporting events, commitments to support family members, religious responsibilities, and social interests.

Zhang (2007) discussed the need for strategies and policies to adopt a reformative approach with parents of frequently absent children. Zhang (2007) cautioned that the most popular measures
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used in the United Kingdom sample studied were punitive and were at risk of perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disadvantage, rather than addressing the root cause of the issue.

**Student or family/carer illness or disability**

Students with disabilities (alongside those from minority or Indigenous groups) report higher levels of school absence than non-disadvantaged peers (Hancock et al., 2013; Kearney, 2004; Melvin et al., 2019). Gottfried (2017) detailed that specific learning disabilities were also associated with school absenteeism. In Australia, the Missing School website (Missing School Australia, 2021) provides support resources for families of students who are absent from school due to long-term illness or disability. Missing School Australia shares the range of educational and interpersonal experiences that students who cannot attend school through no choice of their own encounter. These include loss of learning opportunity, friendship disruption, lack of motivation, and negative effects on emotional wellbeing. Missing School Australia (2021) importantly discusses the readjustment issues recovering students face when returning to school after long periods of absence. They recommend that connection to peers during the period of absence can support creation of personal resilience, optimism, and encourage them to see the future as one of opportunity, not despair.

Hancock et al., (2013) proposed that their observed decline in attendance among senior secondary school students in Western Australia could be a result of teenage susceptibility to illness, and the realisation of more autonomy from parents and thus self-directed decision-making on whether to attend school. Mills et al., (2018) found a higher rate of depression and mental illness prevalence among secondary school students, along with a greater number of students who needed to act as caregiver for their parents or other family members who were suffering from illness. This pressure to adopt an adult role acted as prevention for them to attend school regularly. Moore and McArthur (2009) detailed that studies in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom reported that somewhere between four per cent and 10 per cent of children adopt caregiver responsibilities for family members. This figure is likely to have risen in the ensuing decade. In Sweden, Warne et al., (2020) reported a similarly worrying trend with increasing numbers of students reporting mental health challenges. They recommended that schools work at heightening students’ sense of belonging and motivation to attend school, and to understand the broader context of adolescent development in which such issues emerge.

**School withdrawal**

The combination of the previously discussed factors that ultimately lead to students being absent from school fall under the umbrella construct of school withdrawal. Heyne et al., (2019) discuss
school withdrawal in relation to parents being unable to (i.e., sometimes being without the resources, ability or will) to ensure their children attend school regularly. Kearney (2004) references that some parents are unable to conquer their own anxiety around separation from their children during the school day, that children sometimes help to reduce family economic pressures by working, to protect children from a menacing spouse or ex-spouse, or in some cases as punishment for misbehaviour. Sugru et al., (2016) reported the debilitating effect on school/home partnership when parents have a “a bad taste in their mouth about school” (p. 140). This can stem from the negative experiences the parent(s) had with their schooling, resulting in a reluctance to expose their children to the same. Further complicating the challenge of increasing student attendance is the phenomenon of students instigating their own school withdrawal through truancy (see 2.3 School refusal as distinct from truancy).

School factors – a critical element of the microsystem

Decreased academic success

The correlations that have been established by a variety of studies conclude that not only do students with higher rates of attendance perform better on school-based assessment tasks, but they also achieve better on system-wide standardised tests (Sheldon, 2007). Sheldon’s (2007) findings were preceded by similar results reported by Beresford and Gray (2002) and Mellor and Corrigan (2004) who found that in Indigenous communities in Australia, the achievement gap between students who attended regularly and those who did not was statistically significant. Beresford and Gray (2002) also found that Indigenous students with poor patterns of attendance predominantly lived in low-socio economic communities where schools tend to under-perform against benchmarks. The Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (2013) reported that higher attendance correlated with higher student performance in all areas of numeracy, reading, spelling, writing, and grammar and punctuation strands on NAPLAN testing. Similarly, in Western Australia, Hancock et al., (2013) found that NAPLAN average test performance declined with increased absences, and as absence rates increased, performance continued to decline.

In the United States, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) and Van Eck et al., (2017), concluded that high rates of student attendance have a direct positive impact on student results. Conversely, students who share negative school experiences and subsequent poor academic results record low levels of attendance (Perry et al., 2019). Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) detailed how student attendance is a requirement for success at school, and that in the United States an estimated five million to seven and a half million students could be defined as being chronically absent. More recently, Kearney et al., (2019a) highlighted the real risk of students displaying academic deficiency if their
attendance patterns are poor. Statistics such as those highlighted from the United States illustrate how the prevailing culture of the macrosystem has evolved to accept high rates of absence as nothing out of the ordinary. This details how acute the problem has become and illustrates the challenge facing individuals and broader society when such large numbers of school leavers do so with little to no formal qualifications or skills.

Decreased academic achievement is a two-edged sword when it comes to its effect on student attendance. Not only, can frequent absence lead to low achievement, but low achievement can lead to frequent absence. In Europe, Keppens and Spruyt (2018) discussed the “big fish little pond” theory (p. 422) which posits that students with low achievement levels feel uncomfortable in classes with high-performing peers and may use absence as a coping mechanism. Mills et al., (2018) shared that staff in some surveyed Queensland schools stressed a direct relationship between low student perception of ability and subsequent attendance patterns. The Smith Family (2018) report concurred with a Mills et al., (2018) study in that it found low student achievement could lead to low student attendance. It also reported a strong relationship between attendance and achievement in its study sample. Regular monitoring to track patterns, the use of low student attendance and low student achievement as risk indicators for early school leaving, and early intervention when support needs were identified were recommendations of The Smith Family (2018) report.

**Higher levels of non-attendance due to disciplinary absences – school exclusion**

Often students with frequent absence from school struggle to understand the norms and expectations of the schooling environment. Burnett and Gittins (2011) related how poor understanding of routines and rules can lead to behaviour issues that then lead to further absences because students misbehave and therefore are removed from school through discipline procedures. Morrissey et al., (2014) explained that students must be routinely exposed to teacher modelling and expectations to avoid the self-fulfilling cycle of poor attitude, leading to behaviour issues that result in further absence from school. Heyne et al., (2019) detail that school exclusion includes “problematic absenteeism that stems from school-based decision-making” (p. 16). They reference not only decisions made in response to student behaviour but also the allocation of resources dependent on a student’s need (e.g., a special needs student), and very troubling when a school may encourage absence or discourage attendance to improve a school’s performance on systemic reporting or testing. For this paper a focus on school exclusion due to non-attendance for disciplinary absences is provided.

McConnell and Kubina (2014) described how delinquent behaviour in younger years can develop
into a propensity to experiment with illicit drugs. Students who are absent from the safe environment that school provides can be exposed to risk-filled environments where crime and exposure to drug use increases. Schools should therefore seek to identify students likely to display problem behaviour and intervene early. In England, Bonnell et al., (2019) provided a supporting argument to McConnell and Kubina (2014) as they described the adverse effects that a low sense of belonging to the school has on student behaviour choice and subsequent chances of school success.

In Victoria, Australia, Cobb-Clark et al., (2013) explored the costs associated with student suspension from school. They investigated whether educational outcomes would be adversely affected, and if relationships between student suspension and economic status would be evident. Interestingly, they found that while suspension does affect educational outcomes the relationship between the two is less likely to be causal and more likely to be associated with the characteristics of the suspended student. Their findings reported that the highest educational cost was associated with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings from this report align to a theory that supports how a proactive approach to influencing student exosystems in partnership with families could yield successful improvement in the student-school relationship.

**Poor perception of learning and the schooling experience**

Students are less likely to attend school when they perceive their classes are boring or irrelevant to their interests (Lochmiller, 2013). Ramberg et al., (2019) referred to a strong school ethos and an emphasis on academic success as being factors that enable a positive learning environment. As such, curriculum should be developed that is relevant and engaging to prevent the development of school refusal (Pellegrini, 2007). Kearney et al., (2004) referred to school refusal behaviour as an “umbrella construct” (p. 275) that encompasses many separate issues faced by students that lead to a reluctance to attend school regularly (see further discussion in 2.3 School refusal as distinct from truancy). The issue covers the range of absence, from short periods of non-attendance to the targeting of specific classes to avoid and to extended absences from schooling. To support school refusers to engage in their schooling, real learning challenges focused on the core requirements of literacy and numeracy can help negate the prospect of students feeling disenfranchised with the educational experience, and thus disengaging from their learning program (Cowey et al., 2009).

The phenomenon of students truanting school, not alone, but with their same-age peers who share their interest in avoiding lessons is discussed by Steward et al., (2008) who outline the strong connection that teenagers feel to their friendship group rather than their families or teachers. By
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this stage in their lives, the influence of peers as a stronger factor of the *microwosystem* begins to outweigh that of the family. Teenagers who rely on their peer group for support rather than the significant adults in their lives often see school as a stressor and require specific strategies to support their inclusion in the community of school (Steward et al., 2008).

The existence of another type of absence that is mostly unique to secondary schools is the missing of individual lessons or subjects, as opposed to full days (Garcia-Gracia, 2008). Truanting specific lessons stems from students feeling unable to achieve in that class, distrust or disinterest in the learning material or lack of relationship with the teacher (Garcia-Gracia, 2008). In Ontario, Canada, De Wit et al., (2010) reported students feeling that emotional support for their unique needs as adolescents declined as they entered high school presenting a challenge to all educators to maintain relevant and engaging modes of curriculum delivery.

Application of zero tolerance policies is a negative and counter-productive measure when dealing with reluctant school attenders. Mallett (2015) advocates schools and systems must move away from the implementation of such policies as they are ineffective and can in many instances be harmful to students’ wellbeing. Positive interventions and support are more likely to succeed (Mallet, 2015), and, in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), bring the school and family together in partnership to find solutions within a common *exosystem* that is productive for all concerned.

**Inconsistent school responses**

A challenge that schools, and importantly systems, have failed to overcome is to respond to poor patterns of attendance with consistency. After interviewing 160 educators across the United Kingdom, Reid (2006) identified that systematic responses to managing absence are not implemented consistently. Furthermore, Reid (2006) detailed that school pastoral care staff spend a disproportionate amount of time on absence without a return on investment that could be described as satisfactory. Similarly to Reid’s (2006) findings, a trend was noted by the Office of the Auditor General Western Australia (2015) who observed that whilst pockets of excellent practice were improving student attendance, these strategies were not being consistently implemented across schools and the state. In the United States, Bartanen (2020) studied the impact of Principal quality on the attendance of students. It was found that Principal quality has a substantial impact on student attendance, particularly in urban schools and those in high-poverty areas. He suggested further research be undertaken to ascertain how effective Principals positively influence attendance data in their schools to inform the education sector.
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Bullying

Negative student experience in the form of bullying from other students has been reported as a contributing factor to absence from school in many publications (Baskerville & Loveridge, 2020; Hamlin, 2020; Heyne & Gonzalvez, 2020; Kearney et al., 2009; Mills et al., 2018; Office of the Auditor General, Western Australia, 2015; Reyes, 2020). Bullying discourages students from accessing learning opportunities due to fear. Schools in Queensland that had successfully addressed bullying had done so in a proactive manner with specific programs to counter it (Mills et al., 2018).

Transition from primary school to secondary school can be a common concern for students. Arthurs et al., (2014) and Reyes (2020) emphasise the importance of schools considering their school climate when striving to meet the goal of making education accessible to all students. Looking at the problem of school absence through the experiences of young carers, Moore and McArthur (2009) uncovered a disturbing trend that young carers in their study felt that they had suffered bullying because of being a caregiver for their family member. The transition from primary to secondary school can also provide students with access to more frequent virtual communication modes where cyber bullying can occur.

In Austria, Bork-Hüffer et al., (2021) outline the serious problem that student bullying has become in schools. The researchers asked students to record their bullying experiences in narrative form, finding that students’ “online and offline” (p. 249) lives were encroaching on each other resulting in effects including negative influence on their wellbeing. Bork-Hüffer et al., (2021) recommended further research into the online practices of young people. Waters et al., (2020) presented an argument that the prevalence of cyber bullying in young peoples’ lives required a dedicated learning experience to be included in the curriculum for middle school students to educate their character. They argue that middle school year levels are the appropriate juncture to include this curriculum as this is the time that contains the students’ transition into adolescence and can be most effective in their development (a direct attempt to support development through an existing mesosystem).

In Australia, Pennell (2020) conducted a study within two large independent schools to examine perspectives of school community members on actions taken to reduce cyber bullying. Using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as a framework, the researcher interviewed participants and conducted focus groups to gather data. The findings of the study showed that the two schools were implementing best-practice strategies to combat cyber bullying. School members shared their concern that despite these efforts, incidents of cyber bullying were still occurring. Analysis illustrated the societal influences that contribute to cyber bullying that are not
linked back to actions or practices of the schools. Emergent themes that fit within the *macrosystem* level of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory included the culture of technology, the societal legal framework, and media reporting of the issue. Pennell (2020) explained that four *exosystems* were impacted by the *macrosystem* influences: parents, the organisation, the broader support community of the schools, and schools’ commercial communities. Noting that school “cyberbullying does not exist in a vacuum” (p. 299), Pennell (2020) writes that schools should consider the societal and community environments that influence them, cautioning that these influences can present as “hidden barriers” (p. 299) to the work schools do to reduce cyberbullying among their students.

### 2.9 Highly effective strategies schools can implement to improve student attendance

The reviewed literature presented several consistent emerging themes that have been synthesised within a discussion of highly effective strategies that improve student attendance. It is apparent that “… cost efficient, high impact strategies exist to reduce chronic absenteeism” (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013, p. 6). One of the outputs from this research study to support theory and practice, the provision of the new student attendance improvement model, has been informed by the reviewed literature, the original student attendance improvement model previously utilised by the researcher (see 3.5 Instruments to gather and analyse evidence), and the findings of the Part A and Part B sections of the study.

The consistent themes located in the literature: develop and implement a whole school attendance policy; engage, collaborate, and celebrate with the school community; and use models and systems that have proven to be effective, will be discussed within the framework of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The interrelated nature of the challenge of improving student attendance is evident in the overlap that appears between the three consistent themes. Features of school attendance are naturally related to the models or systems of practice that are implemented to encourage improved attendance, and the strategies enacted to engage with communities and celebrate attendance attainment are intertwined in both policy and practice. The primary focus of this research study is to understand the strategies that have proven to be effective in improving student attendance, thus significant discussion of the models and systems that have worked in various jurisdictions occurs in this section of the paper.

*Develop and implement a whole school attendance policy*

In the early 1990’s, Kube and Ratigan (1992) described the positive effect of Principals developing, enacting and widely publicising school attendance policies. Over the ensuing years,
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it is widely reported that including families in attendance policy development and implementation supports attendance improvement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Cabus & De Witte, 2015; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Harris, 2013; Lochmiller, 2013; Outhouse, 2012; Reid, 2006). Positive impacts that an effective school attendance policy yield include a school-wide focus on “prioritising, focusing attention on attendance” (NAO: National Audit Office, 2005, p. 41). A practical style of approach is promoted by Hallam and Rogers (2008) who explain that raising the profile of attendance, monitoring absence closely and regularly, espousing a positive ethos, and using rewards will help improve student school attendance rates. Balu and Ehrlich (2018) support the use of purposeful strategies that are implemented within a systematic framework. Olson (2014) described how early intervention is critical to the creation of positive attendance habits. Other practical suggestions such as reducing the number of exit points from the school site, to make it harder for students to abscond, and enrolling parents in the celebration process (Grobman, 2008; Reid, 2014) also support an attendance improvement agenda within a framework or policy. Reid (2005a) cautioned schools against excessive focus on only reducing unauthorised absences and encouraged schools to promote and enact procedures that reduce absence itself.

The reviewed literature is consistent in advocating for proactive student attendance improvement programs or policies. Kearney et al., (2019a,) listed a range of topics that a preventative attendance policy may include: “methods to improve school climate and safety, to enhance mental and physical health and social-emotional functioning, to boost parent and family involvement, to reduce school violence and bullying, to review policies that may exacerbate attendance problems, and to implement orientation and readiness programs” (p. 9). This comprehensive set of goals within an “interdisciplinary approach” (Kearney et al., 2019a, p. 1025) is supported by Heyne et al., (2020) who argue that without listening to the experiences of firsthand stakeholders, policy makers will not understand the issues well enough to formulate a successful response strategy. Attendance Works (2020), Jordan (2019), and Kearney et al., (2019a) espouse the enactment of tiered approaches to attendance policy formulation. The value of a tiered approach is the ability for a school to tailor prevention or intervention to the required need. A holistic approach that ensures that the influence the school yields within the student’s microsystem is strong and positive can result in a more positive student attitude towards attendance at school.

Engage, collaborate, and celebrate with the school community
The theme of working in collaboration with the school community (a productive ecosystem partnership) to improve student attendance (Egans, 2015; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Larkin, 2011; Maynard, 2010; Ready, 2010; Wilkins, 2008) runs strongly through the reviewed literature.
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Enhancing the knowledge of the community as to the detrimental effects of frequent absence through education programs and school publications (Egans, 2015), ensuring that the range of interventions cover individuals and the whole school (Maynard, 2010), and designing attendance improvement to be part of a school reform agenda that is promoted as an all-encompassing framework (Young, 2014) are strategies that have yielded success. It is critical that available school information be proactive by providing counter arguments to families who seek to reason why their children have not been attending school (Wilkins, 2008).

The challenge of ensuring that curriculum is relevant, pedagogy is engaging, and that students respond to offered incentives within a broadly shared school attendance policy is outlined by Blyth and Milner (2012). Kearney et al., (2019b) identified the critical link between student expectation of their academic attainment and the lived reality that they encounter as a factor that greatly influences their attendance patterns. If students do not feel like they are a partner (interlinking microsystems creating a positive mesosystem) in their educational experience, then the risk of disengagement is increased. The importance of not ignoring absences, and vigorously pursuing the issue with families as partners in the attendance improvement process (Blyth & Milner, 2012) using available technology such as computerised tracking and registration, was emphasised.

Critically, it is also essential to not only improve attendance, but then stabilise and maintain positive behaviours and habits so that improvement can be sustained (Koopmans, 2018). Bartfeld et al., (2019) describe the mutual benefits to families and schools if they work in partnership (a productive mesosystem) to implement strategies such as breakfast programs and other outreach strategies. Mills et al., (2018) refer to the goal of “building bridges between school and home” (p. 206) to forge partnership in the educational journey of the student. Gottfried and Hutt (2019) endorse a philosophy that respects that “parents are key players” (p. 7) in the process stressing that providing them with tools and ideas on how to ensure positive attendance patterns for their children will support their children to attend school regularly. A further suggestion to support parent-school understanding and to work in partnership is made by Spencer (2009) who describes how enhancing information technology systems to identify patterns of absence and to determine intervention points is a method to identify which students and families require support.

Celebrating student attendance target attainment with students and their families through reward structures is a strategy identified as one that reinforces positive learning behaviours (Attendance Works, 2020; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Jordan, 2019; Reid, 2007; Wimmer, 2010). Recognising good attendance patterns as a deliberate strategy to incentivise students to continue with
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attendance as a habit is reported to be as much about acknowledgement, as it is about the tangible reward. Acknowledgement of one as a valued contributor to a group dynamic is a direct appeal to value them within their closest microsystem. Robinson et al., (2019) challenge this notion. They report that using rewards can be counter-productive and can reverse the intended effect of reinforcing good attendance habits (in essence, their argument is that a good citizen fulfils their obligations to the community exosystem without the need for extrinsic motivation). Balu and Ehrlich (2018) looked at the issue of using incentives as reward for student attendance and offered a “framework for incentive selection, implementation and evaluation” (p. 99). The framework provided a series of steps and reflective questions for educators to use when assessing the validity of attendance incentive use. They also challenged the notion of approaching the appropriateness of attendance rewards as a matter of effectiveness and contend that the issue should be focused on appropriate responsiveness relevant to the intended audience and their need. Virtanen et al., (2020) outlined a finding that students did not require tangible rewards to feel connected to school, rather a positive feeling of being accepted, and supported by the school (a sense of belonging to their microsystems, their linked mesosystems and the broader exosystem) decreased their likelihood to disengage. Baskerville and Loveridge (2020) found a similar sentiment evident in their study of school truants.

Use models and systems that have proven to be effective

Models and systems that have supported student attendance improvement in diverse jurisdictions are evident in the reviewed literature. The multi-faceted nature of the problem of student attendance reveals that such models and systems do not work all the time in every context. Implementation and locally contextual factors impact the effectiveness of the following models and systems, yet they present a rich vein of information to discuss and analyse.

An example of a system initiative that has sought to improve declining student attendance rates proactively and directly is the United States Attendance Works strategy (Attendance Works, 2020; 2014). The Attendance Works website provides easily accessible tools and strategies for schools and school leaders to cultivate a culture of attendance, use data to assess support needs, develop staff capability, and advocate for improvement (Attendance Works, 2020). Strategies to support school policy and practice are illustrated in a Strategies for School Sites model (see Figure 2 below) (Attendance Works, 2020) that includes the recognition of good and improved attendance, the engagement of students and their parents, effective monitoring of attendance data and practice, the provision of personalised early outreach when attendance patterns decline and the development of response programs to barriers as required. This model encourages schools to proactively implement consistent strategies that include influence with students’ microsystem.
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(recognition from teachers), *mesosystem* (positive engagement in partnerships with families and the school, and personalised outreach), and the *exosystem* (a combination of the strategies to build a stronger community ecosystem for students).

A second model, presented by the Attendance Works (2020) initiative, is the three-tiered reform system model (see Figure 3 below) based on classifying student needs according to their attendance percentage. The model is based on three tiers, with a foundational “base” designed to build the whole school supports that enable a culture of attendance prior to any additional steps being taken. To reduce chronic absence, schools are encouraged to target universal, early intervention and intensive support options dependent on individual circumstances. Both models from the Attendance Works (2020) initiative highlight the strategies of monitoring attendance, engaging with families and communities, and recognising and rewarding improved and acceptable attendance. The three-tiered reform model inverts the process of seeking to influence the participants in the school by striving to first create an *exosystem* of universal practices, then working through a process of personalisation down to *microsystem* interventions focused on individuals. Robinson et al., (2019) challenge the use of awards to celebrate attendance attainment finding that a counter-productive, unintended message, can result in a decline in student attendance once the monitored award period is concluded.
Several school case studies are included in the suite of information within Attendance Works (2020). One case study is that of schools in Kent County, Michigan, who reduced chronic absence data by 14 per cent through a collaborative, community-based approach. Central to the success of the Kent County initiative was the strategy of developing capacity of school leaders and teachers to effectively manage non-attendance. Reid (2007) reported the issue of lack of school leader capacity to manage non-attendance stating that “… forty-two per cent of Head Teachers had received no professional development in the management of school attendance … four per cent of Head Teachers had received a considerable amount” (p. 29). School leaders require not only knowledge and skills in this area, but tools and resources to guide and support best practice. The nature of school attendance improvement as being a challenge delivered by skilled school leaders within a coherent strategy is supported by Gottfried and Hutt (2019) who describe the incremental steps of attendance improvement. They describe a series of lessons learned in their work in studying student attendance that are shared to inform the practice of other educators. These include the complex nature of measuring absenteeism, schools cannot address attendance alone, and parents are key players in the process.

In California, Perry et al., (2019) emphasised important steps that must be implemented when addressing student attendance improvement. They advocated a model that includes school educators formulating policies that the community can understand, that knowing what is causing chronic absence is crucial, that the impacting parental factors must be identified and addressed, that educators not underestimate the negative effects of absence on student learning and wellbeing, that an acknowledgment that youth led attendance campaigns can be effective, and
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that negative student school experiences are a barrier to regular attendance. Perry et al., (2019) assert that all school staff need to be part of the attendance improvement solution and share the success of campaigns in California such as “we are all here Wednesdays” (p. 4).

A further model of tiered intervention for student attendance improvement was developed by Kearney (2016, as cited in Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020).

This model (see Figure 4 above) applied a description of high-cost to low-cost strategies within a three-tiered model based on prevention, early intervention, and specialised reports. Each tier is assigned a level of attendance percentage threshold as a marker for educators to apply when assessing the need of individual cases. From tier one through to tier three, the personalisation of the suggested strategy intensifies according to the seriousness of the attendance need. For example, in tier one, holistic, whole school strategies are suggested, while in the third tier, the response strategies target individuals with a deeper level of engagement with outside agencies and, as a last resort, legal intervention. This model adopts a similar process to the three-tiered model in Figure 3 on p. 51 but inverts the tiers to work from a universal or whole school model from the top down.

A model that does not include a visual representation is provided in The Attendance Playbook (Jordan, 2019). A three-tiered approach is, again, used to provide guidance to educators addressing student attendance. The first tier contains a primary section under the heading of effective messaging and engagement. This first section of tier one encourages educators to enact
strategies including nudging messages to parents which prompt and remind families of the importance of school attendance, home visits if patterns of absence emerge, positive messaging to support good habits and patterns, and provision of incentives and rewards to recognise good attendance. The second section of tier one discusses *removing barriers to attendance*. It references the importance of monitoring and support of students’ health, solving transport issues, instigating free breakfast programs, and providing laundry services at school for those in need. *Improving school climate* is the third section of tier one. It contains advice to enact culturally relevant and appropriate practices, and restorative discipline practices. Tier two contains two sections; *effective messaging and engagement* which focuses on early warning systems, mentoring for at risk students and youth engagement strategies, and *removing barriers to attendance* that seeks to address more serious health concerns and unsolved transport challenges. Tier three is the final stage with a more reactive focus on *interventions* including the use of truancy courts, interagency case management and housing support. Jordan’s (2019) playbook provides a comprehensive suite of strategies and steps that educators can use to influence students and their families across the sphere of the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem* levels.

The 2018 formation of INSA, the International Network for School Attendance (2020), by a worldwide group of dedicated school attendance improvement practitioners and researchers has built a foundation for the first truly international coalition for student attendance improvement. INSA was formed to enable consensus on how school attendance problems were classified and operationalised, to support practice through the identification of dissemination of best practices in the field, and to establish an international group with a common agenda (International Network for School Attendance, 2020). The network provides resources and has held one conference in Oslo in 2019 to support and inform interested educators.

2.10 Literature review summary

Synthesis of the key strategies to improve student attendance provide a consistent theme along three lines. Schools can enable student attendance improvement by developing and enacting an attendance policy to track, monitor and review student patterns of attendance. It is consistent in the literature that schools should place emphasis on delivering excellence with student attendance factors that are within their control (the school *microsystem*) such as curriculum relevance, high quality pedagogy delivery, referral to support services, and school activities that engage with their communities to encourage and incentivise students to attend. Collaboration with the community (a connection within the *mesosystem*) through positive partnership development, recognition of excellent attendance, and subsequent celebration promotes positive attitudes towards attending
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Schools also have access to a rich depth of literature on models and systems that have proven to be effective in similar and different contexts that they can draw upon to develop their own contextual responses.

The reviewed literature findings have been synthesised to focus on:

- **tracking** and **monitoring** student attendance within school **policy formulation**
- **engagement** and **collaboration** with the school community
- **recognition** and **reward** for student attendance.

The three central review literature findings were used as the basis for the formulation of the Part B semi-structured interview sub-questions. The causes for absence and the resultant negative effects are many and have been closely detailed within multiple studies. However, there is an absence of research that explicitly and concisely outlines effective strategies that can address the ongoing problem of student attendance in schools. This study, answering the research question “**What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?**” will add to the literature on the topic of student attendance.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Chapter 3. Research Design

3.1 Theoretical and conceptual framework
To answer the research question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?”, a theoretical framework was required to guide coherence of the process. Schools seeking to overcome the challenge of improving student attendance is in essence a problem of systems: systems of belief and values, systems of communication and relationships, and systems of process. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) (see Figure 5 below) is the theoretical framework underpinning this research study.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) consists of a series of nested structures that seek to support understanding of the environments in which participants
live, and how immediate and inter-connected forces and systems shape their development. Level one of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the microsystem which contains the interpersonal relationships, activities and experiences a young person is exposed to in each setting of their life. Essentially, the microsystem is the most influential level on a person’s development as it includes the people and environments which the person interacts with the most. Family, close friends, educators, and places such as school and work exist within the microsystem.

Level two is the mesosystem which refers to relationships between the contexts of the microsystems (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Connections and relationships between settings such as school/work and home are influential in the development of persons, and these change as people move into new settings throughout their life. Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) described the mesosystem as “… a system of microsystems” (p. 25).

The third level is the exosystem which refers to multiple settings that do not necessarily involve the developing person as a direct and active participant (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The development of young people is strongly influenced by events and settings that they are not active participants in. For example, parents, teachers, and politicians make decisions about many factors that young people must exist and develop within that young people have no control over.

Level four is the macrosystem which involves the larger cultural context (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Young people grow and develop within a culture that greatly impacts their forming and evolving beliefs and values. The three systems preceding the macrosystem contain consistencies that form the ideologies and beliefs of the broader culture, and these are often reflected in the adult behaviour and views of the impacted individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner later added the fifth level of his systems theory, the chronosystem (Rosa & Tudge, 2013), that explored the patterning of events and transitions throughout a person’s development. The chronosystem is concerned with how, over the course of one’s life, environmental factors influence development.

After the conclusion of the quantitative sorting process during Part A, Part B of this study occurred in the form of semi-structured interviews with Part B school Principals. At this stage, review of school literature from publicly accessible school websites also occurred to gather further information on the attendance culture within the school communities. The goal to produce a new student attendance improvement model was included so that a tangible product
that could be employed by school leaders and educators to support their practice was produced from the study.

3.2 Implications

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has previously been used as the underpinning framework to support research into student attendance (Leonard, 2011; Melvin et al., 2019; Sugrue et al., 2016). Leonard applied a mixed methods research approach with Bronfenbrenner’s theory to identify and analyse the successful and unsuccessful historical partnerships (over 60 years) that improved student outcomes, including attendance at one urban high school. The concept of partnership being part of the successful solution for significant cultural improvement in the school relates to the elements of the *exosystem* that the school and community were able to productively synergise.

Melvin et al., (2019) applied Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1979) to research that sought to build knowledge about school attendance and absence among all students. Their KiTeS Framework (Melvin et al., 2019) provides a thorough visual representation of the interrelated nature of the attendance challenge and highlights the complexity of the challenge as each of the levels of Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1979) work independently and interrelatedly. This intersection of groups, influences, experiences, and resources provides both clarity and complication. Melvin et al.’s., (2019) discussion that individual child interventions should be complemented by ones that acknowledge children’s interaction with the various levels of their ecological system supports the goals of this study.

Reporting reasons for student school absence with results within levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Sugrue et al., (2016) discussed the *microsystem* as being where a lack of stable housing, parental neglect or abuse, and implications with family size were evident. The *mesosystem* was where difficulties in communication between school and families arose, and a negative perception of school may be evident. Within the *exosystem* parents sometimes displayed an inability to ensure that students attended school because of their own work schedules, commitments, or wellness. The *macrosystem* concerns the broader political and economic context that families exited within. This included the aggregate of the experiences within the *microsystem* and *exosystem*, again underlying the interrelated nature of the school attendance challenge and reinforcing the appropriateness of Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1979) as a framework.

The application of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to a
contemporary research study of how schools can improve student attendance occurred in the following ways. Primarily, the design and method of the research study was developed within a systematic approach to create a product that could positively influence the first four levels of student experience through the lens of inter-connecting relationships. Students and their behaviour toward attendance at school is largely a product of their experiences at home (McConnell & Kubina, 2014), with their friends, and at school (Lochmiller, 2013). The environment of home and school are students’ primary microsystems and the strategies used within the research study’s stages were designed to detail how schools effectively navigate this relationship (the mesosystem) and develop policy and procedures that support student attendance in a positive manner. This layer of influence on students is largely beyond their control, yet deeply impacts on their daily existence (an exosystem), and consideration to the products of such decision-making took place when formulating the proposed new student school attendance improvement model during Part B. The macrosystem of community attitudes, values, and beliefs towards the issue of student attendance in school, and how schools respond to patterns of poor attendance, will be hopefully positively influenced by this study. A greater understanding and broad sharing of the effective strategies that were revealed throughout this study will benefit system and school leader knowledge in this field.

3.3 Methodology and research design

Over the past two decades, several studies have been conducted focusing on the issue of poor rates of student attendance and the resulting impact on learning outcomes. In Australia, these studies have predominantly targeted challenges related to socio-economic status, student behaviour or indigeneity (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004), and have explored the causes and reasons for poor patterns of attendance. The importance of the educational challenge of poor rates of student attendance is one of the single biggest factors affecting the educational attainment of Australian school children (Burnett & Gittins, 2011). A sequential, mixed methods approach with the analysis of quantitative data leading to a qualitative component has been selected for this study.

Sheldon (2007) details a clear correlation between Indigenous student attendance and performance on standardised system-wide assessment, as well as school-based assessment. In Australian Indigenous communities, Beresford and Gray (2002) and Sheldon (2007) found there was a statistically significant achievement gap between students who did not attend school regularly compared to those who did. Conversely, Ladwig and Luke (2014) reported the gains score analysis they conducted on sample schools’ NAPLAN results indicated that no statistical significance could be identified when compared to the same schools’ attendance rates. The
methodology adopted by Ladwig and Luke (2014) focused on the key point of whether it was sufficient alone to attend school to improve results, or whether other factors such as pedagogy style, mode and effectiveness played more significant roles.

More recently, Watson et al., (2015) approached the issue of attendance focusing on retention from the perspective of the community, rather than from the voice of the educators within the profession. This study produced a range of informative and relevant recommendations, including the clear finding that conversations with stakeholders be initiated as early as possible to afford the best positive outcomes (Watson et al., 2015).

The philosophical modelling provided by Morris and Hiebert (2011) contributes heavily to the rationale behind the current study on effective strategies to improve student attendance. Focusing on methods to reduce the variation in learning opportunities for students and improve the quality of instruction that students receive, Morris and Hiebert (2011) examined several systems to identify themes that could be used to reduce variation in settings and improve performance. Concluding that the development of instructional products and methods that can be “… continually tested, and refined” (p. 12) and then implemented consistently across classrooms on a national scale is desirable, Morris and Hiebert (2011) have provided a theoretical model that has application to this study. By taking Morris and Hiebert’s (2011) approach and aligning it to the challenge of improving student attendance, the development of a flexible student school attendance improvement model that can not only be widely adopted but can be refined at a local level to support contextual needs will be of benefit to students and educators alike.

A consistent theme from the available literature was that patterns of and reasons for non-attendance, or decreased retention, along with the effect of non-attendance on learning outcomes, have been frequently visited and revisited. What was missing was a large-scale investigation of the specific actions and strategies that school leaders have employed to combat poor patterns of student attendance. This research study sought to contribute to the knowledge on this topic by approaching the challenge from a pragmatic perspective within the following scope:

1. Increased student attendance is desirable because it supports the improvement of student learning outcomes and the development of an educated society.

2. The reasons for and causes of poor patterns of student attendance, and the resultant effects on student learning outcomes, have been widely studied and for the purpose of this study did not require deep re-examination.
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3. The highly effective strategies that schools implement to improve student attendance were the focus of this study.

4. The implementation of a model of practice to improve student attendance could enhance school leader knowledge on this topic.

The above scope supported the sequential, mixed methods approach that focused on identifying highly effective strategies secondary schools in Queensland had implemented to improve student attendance. Clearly defining the parameters of the research study ensured smooth application of the research process (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2005). The quantitative and qualitative sections of the study link together to answer the research question with depth and breadth. Part A of the study acts as a sorting process for Part B. It was planned that by starting with a large population of state secondary schools in Queensland (208 schools in Part A) and working through the sorting process to the smaller sample group for Part B, a broad and deep body of knowledge could be realised. The 208 schools were in diverse locations and settings and represented an extremely varied population of students. By commencing the study with a large sample of schools, all kinds of perspectives, successes, failures, and strategies were included in the analysis. The decision to focus on schools in Part B that consistently demonstrated high proportions of students with average attendance rates of more than 95 per cent was made to allow depth and breadth when recording and presenting the case studies that emerged from the collation of empirical evidence and semi-structured interviews. These schools emerged from the top five-six per cent of schools within the sample group and it was anticipated that interaction with this level of excellence would yield the most informative information for the purposes of Part B.

The average attendance rate in Queensland state schools in 2014 (the first year of the sample data) was 91.1 per cent (Queensland Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, 2014), and five years later in 2019 it was 90.5 per cent (Queensland Department of Education, 2019a). The latter rate equates to almost one full day of absence per student, per fortnight. This study was designed to investigate how schools who are outperforming peer schools realised their attendance rates.

3.4 Sample schools

80 per cent (n=208) of state schools in Queensland with secondary student populations provided the sample set for this study. Traditional state secondary (years 7-12) and preparatory year to year 12 (P-12) schools made up this sample set. Seventy per cent of schools in Queensland are state schools administered by the state government, with 14 per cent of these being traditional secondary schools, and 15 per cent being combined primary/secondary schools. The remaining 30 per cent of Queensland schools are administered as non-government schools (The State of
Queensland (Queensland Treasury), 2020). State secondary schools in Queensland may be stand-alone traditional secondary schools comprising of year levels from 7-12, or part of an all through model of schooling commencing in the preparatory year through to either year 10 or 12 dependent on community population and thus resourcing. These schools colloquially known in Queensland as P-10 or P-12 schools are mostly located in rural areas and generally have small student populations. However, since the turn of the century several such schools have also been established in large growth corridors of urban areas and have evolved to be enormous super-schools with populations in the thousands. Some exceptions exist but most schools that provide secondary education to students in Queensland meet these two models. In 2015, all secondary schools in Queensland changed to enrol students from years 7 to 12. In previous years, secondary schools catered for years 8 to 12 with a small number of the sample schools in 2014 hosting year 7 in the pilot phase of this system change.

The selected sample schools retain the consistent characteristic of educating students between the year levels of 7 to 12 and they also report student attendance using the same standard (proportion of students within attendance distribution bands). The included P-12 schools were analysed using their whole school data from all year levels to provide a consistent result of school attendance rates from a whole of school community perspective. Schools of distance education, special education, preparatory year to year 10, newly established schools that had not yet grown to enrol all year levels (7 to 12), and hospital schools were excluded from this study as they either do not consistently apply comparable attendance expectations, are not required to record official attendance figures, or do not have student enrolment populations to year 12.

The most appropriate strategies to answer the research question, and what was achievable, was considered in the decision-making process regarding the method to determine the final sample schools. Primary schools are large in number in Queensland and issues of sample manageability would have emerged if all primary schools were included in this study. State secondary school Principals should all be able to relate to research that focuses on their cohort of schools and, as such, were predicted to be open to engage in the interview component of the study. The issue of managing data sets that could be analysed with valid outcomes was considered, and the large-scale sorting from 208 schools to a smaller number of schools was a deciding factor in seeking to achieve this.

At the completion of Part A sufficient evidence was available to identify ten possible participant schools for Part B. These schools were the state secondary schools with the highest proportion of students with average attendance above 95 per cent in Queensland across the three targeted years
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(2014-2016). These schools formed the sample group to interview, collect empirical evidence from, and use as the data source to answer the research question to develop the proposed new student attendance improvement model. School leaders who had consistently maintained high proportions of students with attendance rates above 95 per cent in their respective schools were invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews. School leader participants provided a wealth of information and detailed application of effective strategies during Part B of this study. By targeting the school leaders who were the most successful in the targeted data sample, the research questions were answered from a position of deep experience in the research focus and from a range of perspectives.

3.5 Instruments to gather and analyse evidence

Different instruments during Parts A and B were utilised to gather data for analysis to answer the research question and sub-questions.

Literature review

A literature review of local, national, and global scope that focused on the causes and implications of student school non-attendance was conducted and revisited and reviewed throughout the study. The categorisation of consistent literature-based themes through a deductive coding process (Miles et al., 2014) enabled the organisation of data from previous studies to guide the investigation and, importantly, to stay on course to answer the research question. In particular, the data from the literature review provided a broad base of information to ensure that statistical analysis during Part A delivered a new perspective on the research topic issue and did not duplicate prior research. Also, it was important that this study achieved the development of the proposed new student school attendance improvement model to be innovative and illuminating for readers and participants.

Part A – Statistical analysis of student attendance rates and analysis of multiple factors

The first part of the study comprised of analysis of each school’s student attendance data (the dependent variable) as provided in the student attendance distribution graph in the School Annual Report. The school results were analysed against a range of influencing factors to determine suitability, or otherwise, for selection for Part B of the study. All schools were de-identified. By first determining which schools across the state were achieving high attendance rates, then looking at independent variables, a rich picture of whether schools were achieving their attendance rate results or inheriting them from the broader community (the local exosystem) became apparent. Student and family capability, and in some cases preparedness to engage with
schooling on a daily basis, can be greatly influenced by a range of factors that were considered during the design of Part A of this study to sort the schools before they progressed to Part B. The level of community advantage or otherwise, the size of the school, and the diversity of the student population have all been revealed to be key determinants in affecting student attendance patterns and formed the basis for selection of the independent variables.

Table 5 Independent variables to determine suitability for selection for Part B of study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Supporting reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School ICSEA¹</td>
<td>ACARA (2016); Buckingham et al., (2013); Ladwig and Luke (2014); Perry and McConney (2010); Mills et al., (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School size</td>
<td>Balfanz and Byrnes (2012); Queensland Parliament, Parliamentary Committees (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of student population</td>
<td>Attwood and Croll (2015); Harris (2013); McConnell and Kubina (2014); Mills et al., (2018)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The three independent variables were then analysed in separate processes of regression analysis against the dependent variable. All Queensland state schools publish within their mandated School Annual Reports the proportion of students by attendance distribution bands. Each school reports the distribution of students within the following attendance bands:

- 0 per cent to < 85 per cent
- 85 per cent to < 90 per cent
- 90 per cent to < 95 per cent
- 95 per cent to 100 per cent

Data, as above, for three preceding years is published in the yearly School Annual Report of each Queensland state secondary school in a distribution bar graph (see Figure 1 on p. 29) for the purposes of comparison. Principals and leadership teams use these trends to inform target setting and strategy planning for the following year. The study range for the analysis of this data was the

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¹ Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value is a scale that applies a numerical value to schools in Australia determined by the level of socio-educational advantage experienced by students in the school. ICSEA value considers parental occupations, parental level of education, school geographical location and the proportion of Indigenous students in the school. An ICSEA value of 1000 is the average benchmark value (ACARA, 2016).
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years 2014-2016. One data set from the student attendance distribution graph was required to be used to determine which schools were selected to be included in Part B of the study. In comparison with the average rate of student attendance in Queensland state schools which was 91.5 per cent (Queensland Department of Education, 2016b), any school achieving high rates of students with average attendance above 95 per cent was determined to be statistically impressive. Therefore, the data set used as the dependent variable within the regression analyses was “the proportion of students within the attendance range of 95 per cent to 100 per cent”. This process enabled the first Part A sub-question to be answered.

1. Which Queensland state secondary schools recorded the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016?

Using the average school rates across three years (2014-2016) of student attendance above 95 per cent as the dependent variable, it was necessary to yield a deeper level of statistical significance to select a reliable group of schools for deeper investigation during Part B. This was achieved by taking the independent variables as detailed in Table 3 on p. 63 and using them to identify, then analyse, the clustering of schools that emerged. To answer the second Part A sub-question and achieve the goal of identifying a diverse sample of schools for Part B of the study, an investigation of relationships between ICSEA, school size, and diversity of student population was conducted. This process enabled a set of schools to emerge from Part A. The second Part A sub-question to achieve this aim was:

2. What is the geographic and demographic profile of the schools with the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent attendance?

Part B – Collation of qualitative evidence, the semi-structured interviews to identify data-based content themes, and the new student attendance improvement model

Part B of the research study consisted of several stages. Firstly, the identification of the sample schools from Part A was finalised, followed by the building of successful relationships with identified participant school leadership teams. Further review of available literature and initial collation of collected empirical evidence was conducted to attain a picture of the attendance culture at the Part B schools. Sub-questions to form the basis for the conversational style of semi-structured interview were designed to allow the participant to speak about their school’s enacted strategies openly, naturally and with fluency (Burns, 1997). Shank (2006) details that a process of interview allows the researcher to achieve deep understanding about a topic and the design of questions that encouraged a conversational style achieved this aim. This abductive stage (Asvoll,
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2013) of the study was designed to identify any explanatory patterns of how each school achieved their high levels of attained student attendance, and what their school’s practice could add to the existing body of knowledge on the topic. The sub-questions were designed to be focused enough to allow the interviewee to detail specifics, yet broad enough to prompt a rich conversation about the participant school’s strategies.

The semi-structured interviews were then conducted with data collected through the taping of the interviews with the participants. The sub-questions for Part B were answered in the interviews:

1. How do schools track and monitor student attendance within the immediate school setting (the student’s *microsystem*)?
2. What strategies do schools employ to engage with students’ families?
3. How do schools engage and collaborate with their community (the student’s *mesosystem* and *exosystem*) to improve student attendance?
4. How do schools recognise and reward excellent student attendance (building cultural values within the student’s *macrosystem*)?
5. What other strategies do schools employ to improve student attendance?

Detailed case notes for each school were then constructed that included description of additional points of interest from the interviews, and the review of documents relative to each school. This empirical evidence formed the basis of the case studies that provided a rich picture of each school’s student attendance experience. Given the intention that participant interviews were conversational in style to deeply understand highly effective strategies, school leaders were encouraged to share tools or resources that formed part of their school’s repertoire of practice.

A case study was then collated for each Part B school, and coded references were used to determine data-based content themes from the collective data. The data-based content themes were assigned a relative level within Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and analysis was conducted to support development of the new student attendance improvement model.

**Creation of the new student attendance improvement model**

The creation, refinement, and completion of a new student attendance improvement model to improve student attendance was concluded after Part B. This process was designed to provide a usable model of practice that school leaders may embrace to improve student attendance. The proposed model was designed to provide a level of guidance and specificity that supports school
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leaders to sharpen their existing ideas and strategies yet is flexible enough to allow for local contextual features to be accommodated.

3.6 Criteria to assess reliability/validity of the research design

The world of schools and schooling is dynamic and exciting. There is never a static or fixed day because of the infinite variables that students and their families bring to the fore. A discussion of the ontological position that guided this research study was the starting point (Grix, 2002) for the determination of the validity of the design and method. As an experienced school Principal embarking on a predominantly pragmatic research process within the profession and system in which I worked, I was conscious of not ignoring what Bryman (2007) refers to as the ontological divide. That is, to be aware of and acknowledge the view of the problem, and the beliefs on the causes and answers that I have developed after deep immersion in the issue for a long time, and the need to plan a research design that challenged these. Fundamentally, this research design aimed to uncover the deep and rich knowledge and skill base that exists in Queensland state secondary schools in the domain of student attendance. By answering the research question in the method described, extensive evidence and strategies were uncovered to satisfy an epistemological position that was founded on the sharing of professional knowledge, resources, and skill.

The research question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?”, and deep analysis of the most appropriate methods to answer it, guided the design of this study. Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge, the generation of knowledge (Grix, 2002) and what Creswell (2014) explains is the way of knowing about a phenomenon. The need to improve the sharing of knowledge on effective strategies to improve student attendance in Queensland was highlighted in the Performance Insights survey (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2016b) that detailed how eight in ten surveyed Principals reported that further guidance on how to develop strategies to improve attendance would be welcomed. My anecdotal observation at the start of the research study was that the sharing of knowledge and strategy on any school improvement challenge is not effective across the system and this was exacerbated by a competitive culture that permeated the profession. The counter-productive nature of this culture was challenged within Part B of this study as colleagues were asked to contribute to not only the collation of case studies, but to contribute knowledge and experience to support construction of the proposed new student attendance improvement model that will be broadly shared. In relation to reliability and validity, the logical steps of inquiry from the relative simplicity of Part A, through to the more detailed steps in Part B, were designed to create an onion style approach of peeling the layers until solid
foundations for findings and recommendations were revealed.

Ensuring the consistency of the initial data set (the initial large number of schools) that were analysed and then breaking down into a smaller, refined set of schools was a deliberate design strategy to achieve reliability. Marczyk et al., (2005) stress the importance of research designers planning for, and attaining, reliability so that similar results would be found if similar groups were studied within a similar context (Cohen et al., 2011). The schools targeted for participation in Part B demonstrated a proven measure of consistency and thus reliability by maintaining high rates of average student attendance. To ensure that findings from the interviews were valid, the semi-structured interview questions provided a platform of consistency to guide the conversations. Construction of case studies that tell the tale of each school’s attendance journey enabled synthesis of themes and strategies that were then coded under consistent data-based content themes. The provision of the proposed new student attendance improvement model contributes a final product that is designed to be of benefit to the profession.

3.7 Ethical considerations

The goal that educational research is designed to benefit children (Mayne & Howitt, 2014) drove the design and practice of this research study. As previously stated, student attendance rates in Queensland state schools are not improving at satisfactory rates and system leaders are well-positioned to influence not only strategy but practice in this area. It is my belief that increasing the professional knowledge base in this field should be a systemic priority. One of the strongest determinants of success for a research study is in ensuring that the researcher’s interest is sustained throughout the process (Kumar, 2005). As such, it was a positive aspect of this study that the topic of research remains a firm area of interest to me.

It is acknowledged that several ethical considerations arose for this study. Reid (2005) establishes that community and cultural beliefs affect familial attitudes towards student punctuality and attendance. This was accepted, and because previous researchers have provided a rich base of knowledge on causes and reasons for poor patterns of student attendance, the purpose of this study sought to build on this basis and provide new findings on proven and sustainable actions and strategies that have improved student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools. Thus, actions and strategies, not causes and reasons, were analysed. It is acknowledged that such a position may attract criticism and challenge of findings as some practitioners and researchers may view looking at one without the other an unfulfilled task. An avenue for future research may be to study the causes and reasons for non-attendance mapped against successful or unsuccessful
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strategies in targeted schools. It is also for this reason, why a multi-dimensional attendance improvement model was pursued as a product of this research study.

Presenting as what Berger (2015) describes as an insider, my position as a peer of colleague Principals proved inconsequential during stage one of this process. The data used to sort the initial sample schools was readily available in the public domain and all Principals should be acceptable of the accountability that accompanied this. The long-term purpose of the study was to add to professional knowledge and, in turn, support and build capability. Kline et al., (2014) discuss the difference between researchers who can relate to members of the sample group (insiders) and those who cannot (outsiders). Kline et al., (2014) stress that the personal approach taken by the researcher is crucial to the outcome of the initiative.

During Part B, the personal approach and method of investigation was critical to its success. Principals unknown to me emerged in the sample group. These colleagues may have had varying senses of comfort towards such a process therefore my insider knowledge and skills in supporting their feelings of security were required to balance my position as an outsider. An awareness of this challenge and recognition that a fluid approach which saw me move between an insider and outsider position supported the building of the relationships required to successfully pursue this study (Berger, 2015). By assuring them that the process was a fact finding and discovery process, not a judgmental one, the Part B interviews were successful events. An appropriate professional and personal approach enabled participants to feel valued through their contribution to the research study.

Avoiding personal bias through a large-scale analysis that is refined by data (Marczyk et al., 2005), rather than any set determinants by the researcher, was a deliberate strategy to avoid professional issues of competition and comparison (Berger, 2015). To achieve success with this study, it was crucial that the sample of schools identified to progress through Part A to Part B were aware that data determined the outcomes of the process, and not subjective opinion. It was also made clear that the key goal of the study was to eventually benefit the education community. Clear communication at all stages of the process also aided the achievement of this goal. Ethical approval from Griffith University and the Department of Education and Training was gained to access relevant data, school sites and the personnel within.

3.8 Limitations

The preclusion of several schools that interested stakeholders may believe should have been
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included is one possible limitation of this study. These include preparatory year to year 10 campuses in both urban and regional areas that demonstrated excellent student attendance patterns and could have had excellent strategies to share. Some schools in remote and/or Indigenous communities that consistently demonstrate attendance patterns of note fell outside the scope of this research because they did not enrol students consistent with the selected sample (schools with students in years 7-12) and a valid argument that they should be included in any study of student attendance could be mounted.

Seeking to generalise the findings and analysis of this data within the contexts discussed, and beyond to other contexts, is a possible avenue of future research that could add significant depth to this study. Schools and the communities they serve are complex, inter-related ecosystems of infinite variables. Whilst the schools discussed in Part B of the study have attained impressive, whole school attendance rates, the individual students within the schools will have diverse attendance patterns and a deeper analysis of their stories could unveil a range of data from another perspective. Likewise, an analysis of how the findings and the major product of this study (the new student attendance improvement model) aligns to practices and the variables of other states in Australia or jurisdictions overseas could provide a strong basis of confidence for wider application.

This study looked at whole school attendance data and did not record or analyse attendance rates by cohort, gender, or by any other more granular measure. Trends that exist within whole school rates may have provided an insightful resource and are recommended as subjects for future studies. Further possible limitations include the absence of the reasons for patterns of student non-attendance, and many researchers may believe that without understanding the “why” progress towards improvement will not be attainable. It is also possible that schools with high levels of student attendance rates may realise these statistics through the luck of geography and demography, and not through any targeted strategies. The second sub-question of Part A (what is the geographic and demographic profile of the schools with the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent attendance?) served to negate this possible occurrence.

Interviewing one member of the school community, the Principal, could have limited the scope of learning that was gained through the semi-structured interview. It is possible that a team interview including students, staff, and members of the community may have provided more data for analysis and this approach could form the basis for follow up research.

A multiple regression analysis to assess the strength of the relationship between the dependent
variable selected for this study (the school percentage of students above 95 per cent attendance averaged across the years 2014-2016) and the three independent variables of demographic data – the school ICSEA, the school Indigenous population, and the school population size was considered. It was concluded that for the primary purpose of Part A, the sorting and selecting of participant schools for Part B of the study from within the independent variable categories, this level of analysis was not necessary. It is acknowledged that discussion of the findings of a multiple regression analysis could prove of interest and worth within a study with a different purpose. It is further suggested that a multiple regression analysis could form the next stage of purposeful research for this (or similar more recent) data to build on this study and expand on the findings and recommendations that have emerged.
Chapter 4. Part A: Data findings and discussion – statistical analysis of student attendance rates and analysis of multiple factors

This study was designed to answer the research question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?”

Sub-questions to support a deep investigation of the key research question were:

1. Which Queensland state secondary schools recorded the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016?
2. What is the geographic and demographic profile of the schools with the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent attendance?

This quantitative section of the study describes the nature of schooling in Queensland, the process used to analyse the data, and the findings and discussion that enabled the participant schools for Part B of the study to be identified. Major emergent themes are discussed and analysed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to frame the discussion.

4.1 The nature of schooling in Queensland

The state of Queensland in Australia is an extremely large state. Queensland comprises 22.5 per cent of the total land area of Australia, the sixth largest country by area in the world (Australian Government, 2020). Its land area of 1.7 million square kilometres (Australian Government, 2020) is populated by approximately 5.1 million people (Queensland Government, 2020). For the purposes of state education and local administration of government services the state is divided into seven geographic regions - Central Queensland, Darling Downs South West, Far North Queensland, Metropolitan, North Coast, North Queensland, and South East with 71.9 per cent of the 559 099 Queensland state school students located in the three largest regions by population – Metropolitan, South East, and North Coast (see Figure 6 below and Table 4 below) (Queensland Department of Education, 2019b). 57 827 (which is 9.7 per cent of total student population) students enrolled in Queensland state schools identify as Indigenous Australian (see Figure 7 below and Table 4 below) (Queensland Department of Education, 2019b). Indigenous student populations are spread evenly across the state with the largest population by region in Far North Queensland (21 per cent of student population).
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**Figure 6 Student population by region – Queensland state schools 2019.** *(Queensland Department of Education, 2019b)*

**INDIGENOUS STUDENT POPULATION BY REGION**

*Figure 7 Indigenous student population by region – Queensland state schools 2019.* *(Queensland Department of Education, 2019b)*

**Table 6 Queensland state school regions and student populations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Student population</th>
<th>Indigenous student population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>162 243</td>
<td>7 746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>122 582</td>
<td>7 396</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

State secondary schools in Queensland, either with year levels from 7 to 12 or preparatory year to year 12, were selected for this study. 208 schools that enrolled students in years 7 to 12, regardless of which structure they adhered to, were included in the population analysis. A small number of new schools that opened in the years prior to the sample period that otherwise met either structure were excluded as they did not have full year level representation from year 7 to 12 due to a year-by-year staggered growth process, and thus would create challenges of validity and reliability for analysis.

The Queensland Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 (Queensland Government, 2018a), the EGPA, governs school functions. State schools are designed to be inclusive, non-secular, co-educational institutions that provide education to all children in the state. Provisions within the EGPA governing compulsory schooling and good order and management (Queensland Government, 2018a) are particularly in place to ensure student attendance, well-being, and consequently, learning outcomes are optimised. As detailed in the literature review, many initiatives to promote and support student attendance rate improvement have been enacted in Queensland state schools with little lasting effect.

4.2 The process used to analyse the data and select schools for Part B
To determine the schools that demonstrated the highest rates of student attendance and thus merited further investigation, a sorting process was required. These schools needed to demonstrate sustained high rates of student attendance whilst also meeting this standard within parameters that provide evidence that the outcomes are valid and reliable (Marczyk et al., 2005). Access to secondary school attendance data is publicly available in Queensland and the measures by which student attendance rates are reported have been well established for several years. The attendance thresholds of below 85 per cent as determining concern and above 95 per cent as being desirable, are known by school leaders to be effective ones to use to measure attendance and to devise strategies for improvement. Thus, the parameters within which the study was to proceed to answer the key research question and sub-questions were relatively straightforward. These
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

were:

1. A three-year period of analysis to ascertain which schools had demonstrated sustained results.
2. All schools from the seven regions of the state that had populations from year 7 to 12 during the period of the data collection were chosen.
3. The data set of percentage of students with recorded attendance of above 95 percent was selected as the measurement threshold.

The core purpose of the first stage of analysis of the data sets was to answer the sub-question of “which schools had recorded the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016?”. The samples schools’ attendance data for each of the three years data was entered into a spreadsheet along with their ICSEA as detailed by each school’s School Annual Report published on their respective website. Through the discovery of trends in the data (Schroeder et al., 2017) the subject schools that yielded the richest information to pursue for further investigation were identified. Darlington and Hayes (2017) assert that without consideration of the relationships between dependent and independent variables, arguments of research may be challenged for lack of consideration of external factors. Arkes (2019) describes these relationships in terms of cause and effect and that is the heart of this part of the study. Within this study the attendance rate attainment, that is the proportion of students with more than 95 per cent student attendance over the study period, was the constant variable. Therefore, regression analysis, calculating R² value to determine the strength of the relationship, was chosen as the method to achieve the aim of accounting for variable factors that could influence the data. Schroeder et al., (2017) describe regression analysis as a method to analyse relationships to account for variables. For this purpose, it served as an appropriate vehicle for the first stage of analysis within this study. As regression analysis calculating R² value does not rule out other factors causing influence on the dependent variable (Arkes, 2019), Part B of this study delves deeper into the respective school’s attendance rates through semi-structured interviews.

Within the detailed literature review and coupled with my own experiences as a Principal, three key variables emerged as factors to analyse for effect against the proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016. These are the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), the percentage of student population in each school identifying as Indigenous Australian, and the population size of the school. Calculation of R² value for each of the key variables provided a score by which to determine the strength of the relationship between the factors and provided clustering of schools along the line of regression. These clusters identified trends of attendance rate attainment that challenged the strength of
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relationships, in that some schools were clearly attaining higher attendance rates against challenging variables, and others were attaining lower attendance rates. It was also determined to identify the schools as belonging to location as metropolitan, provincial city, rural or remote.

Once clusters of schools were identified a further sorting process emerged as required to finalise the schools that would progress to part B of the study. It became apparent that some outlier schools had emerged with exceptional attendance rates. Upon further investigation through a website review, it was learned that two schools with exceptional attendance rates had extremely flexible alternate daily attendance procedures resulting in students not being required to complete full days rendering equitable comparison to other traditional settings not possible.

In Australian schools ICSEA is used as a key measure to determine the economic status of a school community. It is used as a benchmark by which to compare the achievement and attainment of schools in national testing against others in different parts of the country with some level of validity. ACARA (2016) describes that the calculation of a school’s ICSEA score is achieved by scaling average level of educational advantage, including parent occupation, level of education, geographical location, and proportion of Indigenous students. The average ICSEA in Australia is 1000 (ACARA, 2016), with lower and higher ICSEA numbers reflecting lower and higher respective educational advantage. Schools that I have led had ICSEA numbers ranging from 901 (very low educational advantage) to 964 (lower educational advantage) and the complexity of these school communities was clear.

4.3 Findings and discussion on the relationship between attendance and ICSEA 2014-2016

This section details, analyses and discusses the findings of the calculated regression analysis and R² value of the 208 Queensland state secondary schools’ average proportion of students with an attendance rate of 95 per cent or higher across the years 2014-2016 in relation to their ICSEA. Discussion and analysis through Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) will frame the findings within a systems lens that supports the process for Part B of the study.

As previously discussed, ICSEA is broadly accepted as an accurate indicator of a school’s likelihood of attainment against key benchmarks (ACARA, 2016). Within this study it was hypothesised that schools with higher-than-average ICSEA (1000 and above) would have higher proportions of students with an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent, and schools with
lower than average (below 1000) would have lower proportions of students with an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent. This would have resulted in a predictable scatterplot with schools of lower ICSEA populating the lower thresholds of the linear progression and schools with higher ICSEA populating the higher end. Realisation of such a hypothesis would also have resulted in a strong relationship supporting the premise that higher levels of educational advantage greatly influence school attainment of the average rate of students with attendance averages of 95 per cent or higher.

The average percentage rate of students in population study schools with an attendance average above 95 per cent was 37 per cent. This average was also used to determine the clustering of schools for analysis. Figure 8 on p. 77 displays the scatterplot and calculated R² value for the relationship between attendance and ICSEA for 2014-2016 for the schools in the study. The R² value of 0.3598 represents a weak relationship (Schober et al., 2018) providing an argument that for this set of data there is no significant statistical relationship between school attendance and ICSEA. Schools have been clustered within the groups detailed in Table 5 below.

*Table 7 Clustered schools for relationship between attendance and ICSEA 2014-2016*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance at expectations – low</td>
<td>Schools with an ICSEA below 1000 and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent below the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance at expectations – high</td>
<td>Schools with an ICSEA above 1000 and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent above the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance below expectations</td>
<td>Schools with an ICSEA above 1000 and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent below the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance above expectations</td>
<td>Schools with an ICSEA below 1000 and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent above the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outliers</td>
<td>Schools that do not fit the above criteria, displaying an unexpected attendance attainment average of students above 95 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Figure 8 Relationship between attendance and ICSEA 2014-2016
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Schools with attendance at expectations – low

A small number of schools (three) at the lowest end of the regression line (Figure 8 above, see light blue boxed schools) demonstrate rates of student attendance averaging 95 per cent or more significantly below (12, 20 and 13 per cent respectively) the average for the study schools of 37 per cent; these schools are shown in Table 6 below. They have ICSEAs well below 1000 (618, 680 and 758 respectively), and are thus significantly educationally disadvantaged communities. To educators familiar with the context of Queensland education it is not statistically surprising schools with such demographics have emerged from this analysis with such attendance rates. Given the already stated links between excellent patterns of attendance and improved likelihood of life success, it is extremely distressing and problematic for caring educators that children in these settings are not accessing their local school to optimise their potential and secure enhanced life success. Of significance is that the small number of schools, and by consequence larger numbers representing elsewhere on the regression line, in this cluster reflect that the challenge of improving student attendance is achievable. The weak relationship between student attendance average to ICSEA supports this optimistic view.

Table 8 Schools with attendance at expectations – low (ICSEA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points below sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>School ICSEA</th>
<th>Points below average ICSEA score of 1000</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the perspective of comparing attendance rates to ascertain effect of strategies, community support or any multitude of variables, it is of interest to compare these three schools. The school with the ICSEA of 618 and attendance average above 95 per cent of 12 per cent could be seen to be performing well if compared to the school with ICSEA of 758 and 13 per cent attendance average above 95 per cent. This sample size is too small to yield a reliable analysis from this data alone however an investigation of the different approaches to improving student attendance could yield findings of value. Likewise, the school with ICSEA of 680 and attendance average above 95 per cent of 20 per cent could be viewed as attaining attendance rates well above both other schools. In direct comparison to the school with ICSEA of 758 it could be seen to be significantly
exceeding the attainment of an educationally disadvantaged school. When compared to the study sample attendance average above 95 per cent of 37 per cent, all are attaining attendance rates below and an argument of under attainment of all three could be valid, whilst acknowledging the unsurprising nature of this outcome. Whilst a small sample and not directly related to the research questions of this study, further investigation could prove fruitful.

**Schools with attendance at expectations – high**

A sample of the schools in the “schools with attendance at expectations – high” cluster are shown in Table 7 below. There are two schools represented at the extreme high end of the regression line (see red boxed schools in Figure 8 on p. 77) demonstrating an excellent student attendance average (both 63 per cent) above 95 per cent. This is significantly above the average of the sample schools – 37 per cent. Both schools also experience high levels of educational advantage with ICSEAs of 1099 and 1159. A larger group further down the regression line represents schools with average rates of student attendance above 95 per cent between 40 and 54 per cent. These are schools with average to high ICSEAs (all above 1000). These schools represent attainment in the studied domain that is above, or significantly above, the sample school average of 37 per cent average attendance above 95 per cent. It is of note that there are only 14 schools attaining attendance average above 95 per cent of more than 50 per cent. Of these schools 12 were in the cluster of schools with an ICSEA above 1000. This, however, does not represent a significant enough sample (there were more than three dozen below 50 per cent) to counter the weak relationship between student attendance average to ICSEA supporting the conclusion that these schools are not achieving attendance rate attainment that is of interest to the purposes of this study.

*Table 9 Schools with attendance at expectations – high (ICSEA)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points above sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>School ICSEA</th>
<th>Points above average ICSEA score of 1000</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>1159</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>1099</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1121</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1054</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1076</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>ICSEA</th>
<th>Attendance Average</th>
<th>Metropolitan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>1034</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>1002</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>1003</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For future study, an analysis of data emerging from this cluster could prove purposeful. Within this cluster, schools demonstrated quite large variance in attendance average above 95 per cent with very similar ICSEAs. One school with an ICSEA of 1076 and an attendance average above 95 per cent of 53 per cent (see orange boxed schools) is attaining rates 16 percentage points higher than the study sample average of 37 per cent. Compared with a school (see orange boxed schools in Figure 8 on p. 77) with an ICSEA of 1007 (69 ICSEA points lower) with average attendance above 95 per cent of 51 per cent (14 percentage points above average, yet only one percentage point in attendance average behind ICSEA school 1076), the challenge of analysis is complicated as the issue becomes one of whether one school is attaining results beyond expectations, or alternately, another one is attaining results below expectations.

An analysis of the differing approaches of the school with an ICSEA of 1099 and an attendance average above 95 per cent of 63 per cent, and the school with a higher ICSEA of 1109 yet a lower attendance percentage average above 95 per cent of 45, would prove illuminating. One school with higher educational advantage is attaining attendance rates above 95 per cent 18 percentage points lower than its counterpart. A further example of disparity worthy of investigation are the schools with ICSEAs of 1121 and 1054 (see purple boxed schools in Figure 8 on p. 77) who both record an average attendance rate above 95 per cent of 54 per cent. An identical attendance outcome in schools with a significant difference in educational advantage (whilst both being acknowledged as being educationally advantaged) could provide a topic for a future study of how ICSEA advantage effects benchmark outcomes. Identifying and analysing the trends of the data within this study could greatly benefit the available knowledge on how to understand and thus improve student attendance in schools.

Schools with attendance below expectations

The schools in the “schools with attendance below expectations” cluster are statistically educationally advantaged (ICSEAs above 1000) yet are presenting with average rates of student attendance above 95 per cent that are below 37 per cent. For the purposes of this analysis, they are determined to be attaining lower than expected attendance rates and are listed in Table 8 on p. 81. The weak relationship between attendance and ICSEA suggests that attendance in these schools could be improved with different strategies and school leadership are recommended to
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

investigate and act. Comparing the school with ICSEA 1049 and average attendance above 95 per cent of 36 per cent against the national ICSEA average of 1000, and the sample school average attendance above 95 per cent of 37 per cent, sets this school’s attendance attainment as being concerning.

*Table 10 Schools with attendance below expectations (ICSEA)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points below sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>School ICSEA</th>
<th>Points above average ICSEA score of 1000</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1049</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1033</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1018</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1014</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1010</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At this point it was also appropriate to compare across the clusters. To illustrate the opportunity for improvement available to the schools in this cluster comparison to schools in the “schools with attendance at expectations - high” cluster is timely. Within the “schools with attendance below expectations” cluster, a school with ICSEA to attendance average above 95 per cent of 1010-31 demonstrates poor attainment against a counterpart with ICSEA of 1007 and attendance average above 95 per cent of 51 per cent (from the “schools with attendance at expectations - high cluster”). A further example is the school from this cluster with ICSEA of 1049 and attendance average above 95 per cent of 36 per cent (just below the sample study average of 37 per cent) compared with the school from “schools with attendance at expectations - high” cluster with an identical ICSEA of 1049 yet an attendance average above 95 per cent of 54 per cent (17 points above the average and 18 above its counterpart). These are two examples of attendance rate attainment below expectations in this benchmark. To answer the research question of this study one is not investigating how schools do not reach attainment benchmarks, rather the focus is on the schools that are achieving high attendance outcomes. To this end, the cluster of schools “attendance above expectations” are of paramount interest.
Schools with attendance above expectations

The cluster of schools of most interest for this study is the group mostly above the regression line in Figure 8 on p. 77, with average student attendance above 95 per cent exceeding 37 per cent and with ICSEAs below 1000. The relationship between student attendance average above 95 per cent and ICSEA was found to be weak, thus resulting in the attainment rates of this cluster of schools presenting as statistically significant. It is unusual for these schools to have recorded these results over a period of three years and investigation of their practices is warranted to answer the research question.

At the core of this cluster are a group of schools that emerged as over-attaining against the demographic challenges of their ICSEA. A number of these schools presented with ICSEAs much closer to 900 than 1000 yet attained attendance averages above 95 per cent far exceeding not only many in the “schools with attendance below expectations”, but also the “schools with attendance at expectations - high” clusters. These include the schools with ICSEAs to average attendance rates above 95 per cent of 920-52, 889-48 and 887-49. By far outperforming schools with ICSEA to attendance average above 95 per cent results of 1000-33, 1011-35, 1049 -36, 1007-51, 1051-51, 1052-47 and the most striking example of difference to the school with ICSEA to attendance average above 95 per cent of 1109-45. To commence the challenge of attaining high rates of average student attendance above 95 per cent with an educational advantage deficit of close to and, in some cases, more than 100 points, and to emerge with attendance averages above 95 per cent of 15-20 percentage points higher is noteworthy and merits further investigation.

The schools grouped within this cluster furthest from the regression line in Figure 8 on p. 77 having attendance average rates for students above 95 per cent significantly above the sample schools average of 37 per cent formed the basis of continued interest. These schools are detailed in Table 9 on p. 83. Of consideration for discussion is that none of the schools within this high attendance cluster of schools were from remote locations, whilst all three schools from the “schools with attendance at expectations - low” cluster were remote locations. Conversely, the three highest attaining schools within the “schools with attendance at expectations - high” cluster were metropolitan locations providing a bookended scenario that detailed that the most educationally advantaged schools recorded the highest average attendance rates above 95 per cent, and the least educationally advantaged schools recorded the lowest average attendance rates above 95 per cent. With a group of schools with low educational advantage bucking the trend with excellent attainment in the middle of this scenario, it strengthened the argument to inquire deeply into how this occurred. Within this cluster four of the schools were in metropolitan areas, with eight of the schools located in rural areas. These locations are of significance as often
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Schools in rural areas face challenges such as transport and other family commitments relative to geography which prove to be barriers for student attendance at school (Mills et al., 2018). From my own experience as a school leader the complexity of the challenge of attaining such outcomes was well known to me. It was indeed admirable for schools to be recording high rates of average student attendance above 95 per cent with ICSEAs below 950 therefore particular attention was paid to these data sets. These schools would be closely followed when analysis of independent variables, Indigenous population, and school size, was conducted.

School ICSEA 897 (see green boxed school in Figure 8 on p. 77) from within this cluster that recorded an attendance average above 95 per cent of 63 per cent and ICSEA of 897 was investigated. A flexible attendance approach due to the nature of the courses it offered was discovered therefore its inclusion for progression was inequitable and it was discounted. Likewise, School ICSEA 887 adopted a flexible timetable and hence attendance patterns could not reliably be compared with the other schools within the cluster, also discounting it from further investigation.

**Table 11 Attendance above expectations cluster of schools – relationship between attendance and ICSEA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points above sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>School ICSEA</th>
<th>Points below average ICSEA score of 1000</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>897</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>918</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outliers

Three schools emerged from the regression analysis that have been labelled outliers. These schools did not fit within the clustering of the other categories due to their attendance attainment statistics that included ICSEAs of 729, 771 and 802 alongside attendance average rates above 95 per cent of 29, 34 and 35 per cent, respectively. These are significantly low ICSEA values indicating extremely low educational advantage within the communities. Also located in remote communities these reasonable attendance averages achieved in such locations is of significance. Whilst below the sample school average for above 95 per cent of 37 per cent, they are all close to comparable with the “attendance above expectations” cluster and noteworthy because of their low ICSEAs. Indeed, when compared with several schools in the “schools with attendance below expectations” cluster the three outliers can be very proud of their attendance average attainment. Schools within the “schools with attendance below expectations” cluster with ICSEAs to attendance averages above 95 per cent of 996-25, 1010-31, 1011-35, 1014-35, 1034-31, and 1049-36 do not compare favourably given their strong educational advantage.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory discussion

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) views the influences on one’s development and interaction with the world through a series of concentric circles that indicate the various relationships individuals encounter in life. Applying such a frame to a discussion of student attendance patterns as related to one’s level of educational advantage is useful to guide the interpretation of these data in a holistic developmental sense.

Schools within the “schools with attendance at expectations – high” cluster, that is with high ICSEA and high proportions of students with average attendance above 95 per cent, could be viewed to host a student population wherein the individual student’s experience supportive links between the layers of their ecological system. This means that their personal microsystem (family, friends, peers, neighbourhood influences), their immediate surrounding mesosystem (school, church, sporting teams), the exosystem (media, family friends, social status, government services) that affects their actions and values, and possibly even the broader macrosystem (laws, society, forming ideologies), directly and positively influence their daily choices and patterns of behaviour in relation to attending school. In its most simple form, it is likely that attendance at schools within these communities is habitual, expected and just what one does.

Alternately, students who attend schools with lower proportions of students with average attendance rates above 95 per cent (from the “schools with attendance below expectations” or “schools with attendance at expectations – low” clusters) may have weaker relationships with the
elements of their ecological system. For the schools in the “schools with attendance at expectations – low” cluster with low ICSEA this may be in part or directly linked to their school community’s lower educational advantage. To illustrate this scenario succinctly, school attendance may not be valued, challenges to attendance may not be able to be overcome, and systems to encourage and build motivation may be weak and ineffective. Students in low educational advantage schools require significant public policy support to overcome these barriers (Reid, 2006).

The schools from the “schools with attendance below expectations” cluster are the group that would cause considerable concern to interested stakeholders. For students to be displaying sporadic or low patterns of attendance within environments where educational advantage is evident an investigation of what is breaking down in systems, communication or relationships within enrolled students’ ecosystems is required. This is not the purpose of the study but could be included in the strategic planning of the respective school leadership teams.

A relatively low R² value of 0.3598 indicates that for this sample of schools the relationship between school ICSEA and percentage of students with above 95 per cent attendance is not significant. Schools with perceived weaker community ecological systems have managed to break with stigma and attain high attendance rates, and yet some schools with perceived stronger community ecological systems have not. Within this sample there are schools who would be expected to attain high attendance rates, and schools expected not to have met expectations, yet the most powerful aspect of the analysis of this factor is that enough schools have challenged their experience and done something to break from conventional expectations. From this section of the study the schools in Table 9 on p. 83 have emerged as those most likely to have a compelling story to share about their attendance success journeys.

4.4 Findings and discussion on the relationship between attendance and Indigenous population 2014-2016

The relationship between school attainment in any benchmark and the proportion of enrolled Indigenous students is recognised as one to consider when researching student attendance and engagement with schooling in Australia (Baxter & Meyers, 2019; Ehrich et al., 2010; Jorgensen, 2012; Ladwig & Luke, 2014). The findings of the calculated regression analysis and R² value of the sample study schools’ average proportion of students with an attendance rate of 95 per cent or higher across the years 2014-2016 in relation to the enrolled Indigenous population will be analysed and discussed.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Schools with a high proportion of enrolled Indigenous students are over-represented in underperformance categories on systemic measures (Baxter & Meyers, 2019; Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017; Zubrick, 2014). It was therefore hypothesised that schools with high Indigenous enrolments could be expected to be under-represented in upper tiers of the domain of attendance attainment, and schools with low Indigenous enrolment could be expected to be attaining higher rates of average student attendance above 95 per cent. With many Indigenous school populations located in remote and rural areas it could also be hypothesised that schools located in such areas would attain lower average attendance rates, and schools in metropolitan areas would attain higher average attendance rates. The relationship between Indigenous population and student attendance average above 95 per cent across the sample schools could also be expected to yield a strong $R^2$ value. These hypotheses will be analysed within this discussion as will observations of the findings of this factor in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Figure 9 on p. 88 displays the scatterplot and calculated $R^2$ value for the relationship between average attendance above 95 per cent and Indigenous population for 2014-2016 for the schools in the study. The $R^2$ value of 0.2479 is low (Schober et al., 2018), providing an argument that for this set of data there is no significant statistical relationship between school attendance and Indigenous population. The National Report on Schooling in Australia (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2018; 2019) states that the total proportion of Indigenous enrolments in Queensland schools across the two years of 2016 and 2017 was 7.8 per cent, and eight per cent respectively. It was therefore determined that nine per cent would be applied as a higher end threshold cut off to identify schools with a significant Indigenous population for analysis and discussion, and eight per cent would be applied as the lower end threshold. Schools have been clustered within the groups detailed in Table 10 below.

Table 12 Clustered schools for relationship between attendance and Indigenous population 2014-2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance at expectations – low</td>
<td>Schools with an Indigenous population above nine per cent and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent below the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance at expectations – high</td>
<td>Schools with an Indigenous population below eight per cent and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent above the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance below expectations</td>
<td>Schools with an Indigenous population below eight per cent and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent below the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools with attendance above</td>
<td>Schools with an Indigenous population above nine per cent and attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent above the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outliers</td>
<td>Schools that do not fit the above criteria displaying an unexpected attendance attainment average of students above 95 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Figure 9 Relationship between attendance and Indigenous population 2014-2016
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

**Schools with attendance at expectations – low**

The schools in the “schools with attendance at expectations – low” cluster are spread across the X axis (see Figure 9 above) representing proportions of Indigenous populations from nine per cent to almost 100 per cent. This is a broad spectrum of the sample of schools all attaining rates of attendance above 95 per cent below 30 per cent. A small group of schools with student populations comprising almost entirely of Indigenous students are represented in this cluster. These schools are also located in remote locations within the state and thus face challenges associated with schooling in these contexts. One school (see yellow boxed school in Figure 9 on p. 88) with 87 per cent enrolled Indigenous students that attained an average percentage of student attendance above 95 per cent of 29 per cent is attaining positive attendance rates in direct comparison to the other schools in this cluster who have attained 12, 13 and 20 per cent above 95 per cent attendance average, respectively. However, against the sample school population average above 95 per cent (37 per cent) this school is attaining a lower attendance rate.

Schools within this cluster with proportions of Indigenous population close to or below 50 per cent can again be analysed in several ways and in two further groupings. Those with attendance rates above 95 per cent close to 30 per cent may celebrate an outcome relative to their context and challenges as not that far removed from the sample school average of 37 per cent. In that sense these schools could celebrate relative acceptable attendance rate attainment, yet in real terms they are attaining rates lower as measured against the sample school average. Within the context of this study in the interest of local, community and state-wide improvement, a belief that due to their context they cannot be expected to attain attendance at any higher rates should be challenged. It is also apparent that the schools grouped with Indigenous population proportions closer to 20 per cent and 10 per cent have demonstrated attendance above 95 per cent at rates below expectations. Further analysis of local demographics would help yield accurate conclusions for the reasons for this. For this study’s analysis and due to the existence of schools with similar Indigenous population proportions in higher attendance attainment clusters, it is reasonable to conclude that these schools need to investigate and implement strategies to arrest their low attendance rates and seek to buck the trends of their context.

**Schools with attendance at expectations – high**

Schools within this cluster (represented in Table 11 below) are those that present with low proportions of their student population identifying as Indigenous (below eight per cent) and average rates of attendance above 95 per cent above the sample average of 37 per cent. These schools are located mostly above the regression line close to the Y axis (see Figure 9 on p. 88).
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Table 13 Schools with attendance at expectations - high (Indigenous population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points above sample schools' average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>Proportion of population identifying as Indigenous – per cent</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63 (two)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Schools with low proportions of Indigenous student population face different challenges and barriers to regular student attendance. There is a large grouping of schools within the cluster represented by schools with Indigenous populations below eight per cent and average attendance rates above 95 per cent between 38 and 49 per cent. These schools are attaining attendance averages above the sample average (37 per cent) and in this respect could be seen to be exceeding expectations. It is of note though that within this cluster disparity of attainment also appears. The school with an Indigenous student population of two per cent and average attendance rate above 95 per cent of 39 per cent (see pink boxed schools in Figure 9 on p. 88) compares poorly to its counterpart also with an Indigenous population of two per cent yet an average attendance rate above 95 per cent of 54 per cent (see pink boxed schools in Figure 9 on p. 88). Likewise, the school attaining an average attendance rate above 95 per cent equal to the sample school average of 37 per cent which consists of an Indigenous population of five per cent is achieving ten percentage points below a counterpart with the same Indigenous student percentage. Further investigation of possible different approaches to strategy could prove useful to determine how these differences in attainment have occurred.

There are three schools (see orange boxed schools in Figure 9 on p. 88) with the highest average attendance rates above 95 per cent within this cluster (all 63 per cent average attendance rate above 95 per cent and zero to one percent Indigenous population). One of these schools provides specialised language acquisition programs to a clientele that does not cater for Indigenous students. Two of these schools were also represented in the ICSEA “schools with attendance at
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

expectations – high cluster”. This might suggest to some that a conclusion can be drawn that schools with high ICSEA and low proportions of Indigenous student population will attain the highest attendance rates. This would be an overly simplistic analysis for two reasons. Firstly, there are only two standout schools in both population analyses (ICSEA and Indigenous population) presenting as a limited sample and, secondly, there are more schools with similar demographics (that is, one to three per cent Indigenous population) that are not presenting with the same high attainment rates. If small Indigenous student populations resulted in high average attendance rates, then these schools would be attaining even higher attendance rates, and the relative relationship would be stronger and thus of more statistical significance.

Schools with attendance below expectations
Schools in the “schools with attendance below expectations” cluster present as attaining attendance rates above 95 per cent below expectations. This is due to a comparison of their low attendance rates against the sample school average attendance rate of 37 per cent above 95 per cent given their relatively low percentage of Indigenous student population. These schools are located below the regression line and given the relative weakness of the $R^2$ value for this factor could possibly improve their attendance rates with targeted strategies. Within this cluster schools range in Indigenous population percentage from three to eight percent, with average attendance rates above 95 per cent ranging from 25 to 36 per cent.

Differences in average attendance attainment above 95 per cent of up to ten points within this cluster (35 per cent above 95 per attendance with five per cent Indigenous population to 25 per cent above 95 per attendance with five per cent Indigenous population; see light green boxed schools in Figure 9 on p. 88) also provide data of interest. The same Indigenous population and such a variance in average attendance attainment provokes concern and interest in equal measure. Investigation of how such a variance may be affecting other student attainment measures could be enlightening when seeking to acquire a full picture of the school’s performance. Interested educators would find this cluster of schools’ attendance rate attainment disappointing and may seek to investigate how attendance rates at these schools may be affecting academic outcomes. For this study, these schools provide a benchmark to prompt interest in the other schools that can assist in answering the research question.

Comparing across cluster groups it is of interest that a school in this cluster presents with an average attendance rate above 95 per cent of 29 per cent alongside an Indigenous population of six per cent. Conversely, a school from the “schools with attendance at expectations – high” cluster is attaining average attendance above 95 per cent of 46 per cent, 17 percentage points
higher with the same proportion of Indigenous population of six per cent. A further example of 20 percentage points difference in two schools across clusters (25-5 and 45-5) reinforces the concerning nature of the attendance attainment within this cluster of schools.

**Schools with attendance above expectations**

The cluster of schools that provokes most interest and the richest data to answer the research question are the “attendance above expectations” cluster that lies above the regression line grouped towards the Y axis (Figure 9 on p. 88). These schools present with Indigenous populations ranging from nine per cent to 32 per cent, and average attendance rates above 95 per cent from 36 per cent to 52 per cent. A small number of schools with average attendance rates above 95 per cent of 36 per cent which is one percentage point below the sample school average of 37 per cent, have not been included in this cluster. However, due to their attainment of these rates whilst presenting with Indigenous student populations at or above the benchmark of nine per cent could provide rich data to investigate in further studies.

With a weak relationship evident for this variable, it is statistically significant that the schools in this cluster have attained these attendance rates because so many other schools with similar demographics have not. An investigation of the nature and implementation of attendance improvement strategies at these schools will directly assist to answer the research question. Schools within this cluster presenting with results of significance include the rural school (see purple boxed schools in Figure 9 on p. 88) with an Indigenous population of 32 per cent attaining average attendance above 95 per cent of 48 per cent. When compared against a metropolitan school with a three per cent Indigenous population (from the “schools with attendance at expectations – high” cluster) attaining average attendance above 95 per cent of 47 per cent (one percentage point lower) this school’s attendance attainment stands out as significant. Furthermore, one school (see purple boxed schools in Figure 9 on p. 88) with an almost one-in-five Indigenous student population of 19 per cent attained average attendance above 95 per cent of 52 per cent. This school is in a rural area, and when comparing its attendance rate against a metropolitan counterpart with the same average attendance rate above 95 per cent of 52 per cent, yet with an Indigenous population of two per cent, the significance of this data is clear.

Schools from this cluster presenting with the highest attendance rates above 95 per cent, that is furthest removed from the regression line (Figure 9 on p. 88) have been included in Table 12 below. Two of the eleven schools are in metropolitan areas, with nine in rural locations. Of note is that within this group of schools the percentage points above sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent in the lowest end of this table is only two to four percentage
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Table 14 Attendance above expectations cluster of schools – relationship between attendance and Indigenous population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points above sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>Proportion of population identifying as Indigenous – per cent</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Provincial city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Provincial city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outliers
Two schools fall within the outlier cluster of schools. These schools present with significant Indigenous populations of 57 per cent and 95 per cent respectively, and average attendance rates above 95 per cent of 34 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively. These attendance rates fall above the regression line (Figure 9 on p. 88) and below the sample schools’ average of 37 per cent. These rates could be viewed as satisfactory if measured against traditional views of limitations on Indigenous community attainment. Given that they are close to the sample schools’ average and are better outcomes than schools represented in the “schools with attendance at expectations – low” cluster, then these schools do not fit within the other groupings.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory discussion
Applying the frame of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to an analysis of student attendance rates in relationship with Indigenous student population provokes thought regarding the nature of one’s influential others. The data collected within this study is whole school and does not allow for the nuance of individual, family, or community influential factors. The individual sits at the heart of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Theory’s (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) series of concentric circles, yet school, and indeed governmental, policy that directs aspects of student experience like attendance rarely cater for the breadth of needs of individuals. Where this can be catered for is in the strategy implemented at a school level or community level.

The microsystem within Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the closest and most personal layer of the ecosystem. It intersects with the mesosystem and numerous researchers have detailed the challenges and complexities of defining and detailing the specific strategies that will support Indigenous attendance and subsequent learning outcomes within complex Indigenous communities (Baxter & Meyers, 2019; Ehrich et al., 2010; Jorgensen, 2012; Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017). One’s exosystem is an extremely important influence on how one acts and the values that one holds. It is prudent to seek to understand how schools with considerable Indigenous student populations have succeeded in building motivation within the individual student and across their broader mesosystem and exosystem. The wider macrosystem, that is the laws, policies, societal ideologies, and culture of a community has less impact. This is evidenced by the disparity in attendance performance within the sample schools with similar Indigenous populations. All these schools are governed by the same laws and policies. It is concluded that local application of attendance improvement strategy and relationships with stakeholders that aligns with common interest and experience at the microsystem and mesosystem level may be critical in devising and enacting successful strategies.

4.5 Findings and discussion on the relationship between attendance and population size 2014-2016

Schools within the sample study group ranged in size from over 3000 students to just under 100 students. The largest school in the study consisted of 3149 students and the smallest 85 students. The structure of these schools varies dependent on their location and community need. All-through preparatory year to year 12 schools can be located in high growth urban areas and are mostly newly built in the last two decades, or are older schools repurposed to fit this model. Other preparatory year to year 12 schools generally serve rural communities where the student population does not exist to offer depth and breadth in senior (year 11 and 12) subject offerings. Some prospective year 11 and 12 students from these schools may board in a regional metropolitan centre or travel reasonable distances to a nearby town where a larger secondary school exists. The largest schools are in metropolitan areas to serve either established suburban populations or growing corridors of urban residential areas. The smallest schools are in rural or remote parts of Queensland, often requiring attending students to travel significant distance to
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Very little literature is available to support any understanding of the effect of school size on attendance in Queensland schools. Mills et al., (2018) found no discernible link between school size and the probability of higher student attendance rates. Figure 10 on p. 96 contains the scatterplot and calculated $R^2$ value that illustrates the relationship between attendance and population size 2014-2016 for the study sample schools. The $R^2$ value of 0.1248 is low (Schober et al., 2018). The broad spread of the schools across the regression line indicates that no statistical significance can be attributed to the relationship between student attendance and population size for this sample of schools. Of note is that only 14 schools presented with attendance averages of above 95 per cent at a rate of more than 50 per cent.

The dual purposes of Part A of the study were to select schools for progression to the qualitative component (Part B) of the study, and to answer the first sub-question “which Queensland state secondary schools recorded the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016?”. As little statistical significance could be drawn from the relationship between student attendance and population size for this sample of schools, the analysis of these schools became relatively uncomplicated. Firstly, the schools with highest average attendance of above 95 per cent were identified and then commentary against their location and counterpart schools was provided. Schools were clustered according to size in groups as detailed in Table 13 below. As discussed in 3.8 Limitations, future extension of this research could include a multiple regression analysis to support enhanced understanding of the relationships between the three independent variables.

Table 15 Clustered groups for relationship between attendance and school population size 2014-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large schools</td>
<td>Schools with student populations exceeding 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium schools</td>
<td>Schools with student populations from 1000-2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small schools – higher attendance</td>
<td>Schools with student populations up to 1000 and attained attendance average of students above 95 per cent above the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small schools – lower attendance</td>
<td>Schools with student populations up to 1000 attaining attendance average of students above 95 per cent below the sample schools average of 37 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Figure 10 Relationship between attendance and population size 2014-2016

- Small schools - higher attendance
- Medium schools
- Large schools

Figure 10 Relationship between attendance and population size 2014-2016
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

The large and medium sized clusters were evenly spread both across the X axis and on either side of the regression line. Little analysis of substance was possible, so attention was paid to the smaller schools’ cluster where more variation in performance was evident. Due to this wider distribution “small schools - high attendance” and “small schools - low attendance” analysis was conducted. It was determined that schools within this cluster that were attaining attendance rates above 95 per cent higher than their like-sized counterparts would be of most interest to compare against the other variable factors of ICSEA and Indigenous population to identify the Part B school sample schools.

**Large schools**

“Large” schools were represented in the data sample both above and below the regression line (see Figure 10 on p. 96). The largest school in the study with 3149 enrolled students presented with the highest average attendance rate above 95 per cent of 63 per cent. Its attendance rate peer within this cluster, also with 63 per cent, had an enrolment of 2253. Comparing the two large schools with 63 per cent attendance average above 95 per cent (see purple boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96) with similar sized schools provokes interest. A school below the regression line with 2978 enrolled students (see purple boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96) attained an attendance average above 95 per cent of 39 per cent, close to the sample school average of 37 per cent. With a similar student population to the largest school (2978 to 3149) a comparative attendance attainment rate of negative 24 percentage points is interesting. Likewise, a school with almost the same student population as the second school (see purple boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96) with 63 per cent attendance average above 95 per cent (2290) attained a rate 12 percentage points lower at 51 per cent attendance average above 95 per cent. These discrepancies lend further credence to the need to conduct secondary research analysis to understand these patterns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points above sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>3149</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>2253</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2290</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3109</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2585</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2042</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2735</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2062</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2978</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>2585</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>2427</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>2097</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>2057</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14 schools are represented in the “large schools” cluster (Table 14 above). Nine schools present below the regression line, with four above. Schools below the regression line with population to attendance average above 95 per cent attainment equal to or below the sample school average of 37 per cent above 95 per cent number five (see light green boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96). Further investigation of these schools revealed that they are all located in urban metropolitan areas with four of the five recording above average (>1000) ICSEAs indicating that socio-educational disadvantage is not widely evident in these communities. Within the large school cluster these schools are attaining attendance rates above 95 per cent lower than their counterparts close to or above the regression line. An argument that could be tabled is that larger schools are far more complicated and complex, preventing a personal approach to matters such as student attendance improvement. This argument is both debunked and supported by this data set as the largest schools are both attaining and failing to attain consistently high attendance averages. Comparing across the clusters again highlights the insignificant relationship of attendance to population size with many medium sized and small schools recording far higher attendance average rates above 95 per cent than these large schools. There are also many schools within the medium and small school clusters attaining attendance rates above 95 per cent that place them below the regression line and the sample school average. Thus, it proved imperative that further investigation of individual school practice occurred.

**Medium schools**

A cluster of “medium” sized schools, more in number than the large schools cluster, lies in the middle and is scattered mostly evenly across the regression line in Figure 10 on p. 96. There are slightly more schools represented above the regression line than below. Within this cluster of schools there is a distinct group of schools (see orange boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96) recording attendance average above 95 per cent of 50 per cent and above. The data for these schools is represented in Table 15 below.
Table 17 Medium schools average attendance above 95 per cent of above 50 per cent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points above sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1690</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1463</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1294</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1580</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1160</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1639</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1431</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1415</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The schools represented in Table 15 above are all located in metropolitan urban areas. Their attendance average above 95 per cent is statistically impressive as their attendance attainment ranges from 14 points above the sample school average to 17 points above the sample school average. It appears that these schools have enacted strategies that have created a positive attendance culture. The weak relative relationship for the variable of population size indicates that further investigation of school strategy and culture is required to understand the nature of the discrepancy in data with the following group – medium sized schools with attendance average above 95 per cent below sample school average.

Table 15 above represents a sample of schools from the medium schools cluster with attendance average above 95 per cent that is significantly below the sample school average of 37 per cent (see yellow boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96). These schools are in metropolitan (four), provincial city (one) and rural areas (one) providing broader geographic diversity than the schools in Table 16 below.

Table 18 Medium schools average attendance above 95 per cent significantly below 37 per cent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points below sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1459</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1683</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Provincial city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1177</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1519</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1098</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Small schools – lower attendance

Schools identified in the small schools’ cluster recording average attendance above 95 per cent below the sample average lie below the regression line in Figure 10 on p. 96. This is a large cluster of schools numbering approximately 60 and they are scattered along the X axis ranging from smaller populations in the low hundreds to just below 1000. Given the weak relationship between school population size and attendance average above 95 per cent for this data set emerging trends were identified for analysis. An interesting sub-set of data represented by schools all recording average attendance above 95 per cent just below the sample school average provides evidence that factors of influence far beyond school size require study to understand the nature of the problem of attendance improvement. Three schools with average attendance above 95 per cent of 33 per cent with student populations of 933, 648, and 267 are also located in diverse locations. Two are in rural locations and one is from a metropolitan setting.

Those schools recording average attendance above 95 per cent significantly below the sample school average are listed in Table 17 on p. 101. Nine schools emerged in two groups from this mini cluster. Three schools with recorded average attendance above 95 per cent of 25 per cent (see pink boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96) presented from very different locations. One rural, one metropolitan, and one remote school presented with identical recorded attendance. Two of these schools were at the larger end of the small school scale with 759 and 947 students, respectively. The third school with a population of 213 was significantly smaller than its two counterparts. Further investigation of these three schools as a mini study could provide interesting insight into how schools in very different locations and of different sizes approach the challenge of improving student attendance. With attendance averages above 95 per cent of 24, 23, and 22 per cent, respectively three more schools are grouped in the mini cluster. These three schools spanned locations of a provincial city, a metropolitan, and a rural setting. Population size varied from 674, to 579, to 355. All three schools recorded above 95 per cent attendance averages that are significantly below the sample school average.

Three schools (see light blue boxed schools in Figure 10 on p. 96) present as the lowest attaining
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

in the state against the metric of average attendance rate above 95 per cent. With average attendance rates above 95 per cent of 20, 13 and 12, these schools are in rural locations and possess student populations of 340, 609, and 130, respectively. Recording attendance averages above 95 per cent below the sample school average of -17, -24, and -25, respectively, these schools require significant improvement in their attendance rates. As all three schools are in rural settings it would be necessary to test the relevance of location as a factor against other results before determining this as significant. Given the much higher attendance rate attainment above 95 per cent of schools in the next cluster group from similar locations (small schools - high attendance) the significance of this outcome within this study is discounted.

Table 19 Small schools average attendance above 95 per cent significantly below 37 per cent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points below sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>674</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Provincial city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Small schools – higher attendance

A group of schools numbering approximately 45 populate the “small schools – higher attendance” cluster above the regression line (see Figure 10 on p. 96). These schools are spread relatively evenly across the X axis. Attendance averages above 95 per cent in these schools range from the sample school average of 37 per cent to 63 per cent. School populations range from 140 to nearly 1000 and their locations record the interesting result that all of these schools recording statistically significant attendance rates are from metropolitan and rural settings, none are from provincial cities or remote locations. The overwhelming majority of schools in this cluster populate the spread of attendance attainment between the sample schools’ average of 37 per cent and the mid-to-upper 40 per cent range. Only two schools lie in the above 50 per cent attendance above 95 per
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

cent range illustrating the extreme difficulty in attaining this objective.

The second highest attendance attaining school (see green boxed school in Figure 10 on p. 96) in this cluster of schools attained an attendance average above 95 per cent of 52 per cent, 15 points higher than the sample schools’ average. With a population of 507, this school lies in the middle of the X axis line, is in a rural setting and is also the same school referred to in relation to its Indigenous student population of 19 per cent. The range of strategies implemented at this school to attain such attendance rate attainment are likely to be relevant to answer the research question. The highest attendance rate attained by a school in this cluster was 63 per cent. This is the same school referenced in ICSEA discussion in “Schools with attendance above expectations” that was discounted from further exploration (see footnote 2).

The average attendance attainment of a group of schools above the regression line with significantly higher attendance average rates above 95 per cent than those discussed in “small schools – lower attendance” reinforces the conclusion that school size does not influence attendance attainment. The weak R² value of 0.1248 supports this view and provides further need for individual school assessment to occur. The schools from the “small schools – higher attendance” cluster demonstrating average attendance above 95 per cent that is significantly above the sample schools’ average of 37 per cent are listed in Table 18 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage points above sample schools’ average attendance rate above 95 per cent (37 per cent)</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Average attendance rate above 95 per cent</th>
<th>Location – Metropolitan, Provincial city, Rural or Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>253²</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>239³</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² This school adopts a flexible attendance approach due to the nature of its courses and is discounted from further analysis. See ICSEA, Schools with attendance above expectations
³ This school adopts a flexible timetable and is discounted from further analysis. See ICSEA, Schools with attendance above expectations
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metropolitan</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>749</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>380</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>724</td>
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<td>612</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>911</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>275</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory discussion

A discussion of the analysed data within the school population size domain of this study as related to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) contributes to the conclusion that individual school study analysis is required to truly understand the nature of the collected data. School population size from the largest to smallest school varied by more than three thousand students and within that range other variable factors likely influence attendance patterns. One could apply a hypothesis that assumes that smaller communities might provide the support and tight sense of family that students require to attend with excellent regularity. The inverse could be proposed, that is, larger schools could lose their sense of community and allow individual students to get lost and not feel connected to or with. Both hypotheses are challenged by the existence of no clear pattern of attendance rate attainment and the weak R² value of 0.1248.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) asserts that the individual acquires their greatest learnings and beliefs from their closest links – the microsystem of family, school, and peers so perhaps a smaller community might be beneficial for optimum student connectedness. This set of data however showed that large schools and small schools are represented at both ends of the attendance attainment spectrum. Several schools with populations well over two thousand students had excellent attendance averages, whilst others of similar size attained rates many percentage points lower. Small schools displayed excellent attendance averages above 95 per cent whilst counterpart schools of similar size presented much lower attendance averages. Much deeper investigation of the individual school actions delivering such outcomes is required.

All schools in the sample are governed by the same macrosystem of laws and societal expectations, as well as consistent government application of policy and procedure (important
elements of the *exosystem*). Some regional differentiation is experienced by students in different geographical locations, thus providing a varied *mesosystem* experience but, again, no discernible patterns were evident in schools from similar locations. This disparity in attendance rate attainment and the weak relative relationship once more presents a picture of inconsistency. The *mesosystem* and *exosystem* are important elements of student and childhood experience, and a deeper understanding of the cultural values and norms of high attendance attainment schools will enable better conclusions to be drawn.

### 4.6 The sub-questions for Part A

The first sub-question of Part A to support a deep investigation of the key research question was:

1. Which Queensland state secondary schools recorded the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016?

The conducted analysis and discussion in Part A resulted in a group of schools emerging of most interest for further investigation. It was decided that ICSEA would be the best identifying code to use to label the schools (to protect each school’s name). The highest attaining schools were placed in order of attainment in each independent variable for sorting and comparison. Both “medium schools” and “small schools – higher attendance” were included in the sorting table alongside ICSEA and Indigenous population. “Large schools” were excluded as it had already become apparent that none of these schools would fulfill either of the ICSEA or Indigenous population variable criteria to merit further investigation within this study. It is acknowledged that case study analysis of the two highest attendance attaining average (both above 60 per cent) large schools could be illuminating within another study. Table 19 on p. 104 details the schools in the sorting table.

Ten schools (ICSEA 920, 936, 889, 935, 911, 918, 947 (1), 927, 954 and 1034) appear multiple times within the independent variables sorting process in Table 19 below. These schools were contacted by initial email to ascertain preparedness to participate in Part B of the research study. Two of the schools declined at this stage. The remaining eight schools participated in introductory phone calls to discuss the requirements of the study and six schools agreed to proceed. These schools are shaded in Table 19 below and their school details are displayed in Table 20 on p. 105.

*Table 21 Sorting for Part B schools (labelled by school ICSEA number)*
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>ICSEA</th>
<th>Population – medium schools</th>
<th>Population – small schools, higher attendance</th>
<th>Indigenous Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>1121</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>1049</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>1054</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>1076</td>
<td>995</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>1055</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>1034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>918</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>994</td>
<td>936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>947 (1)</td>
<td>1034</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>947 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>1022</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>947 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second sub-question for Part A to support a deep investigation of the key research question was:

2. What is the geographic and demographic profile of the schools with the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent attendance?

Each of the selected schools had their geographic and demographic profiles individually detailed within their individual case studies in Part B. By way of summary, they each exceeded the sample school average of percentage of students with average attendance above 95 per cent (37 per cent) by between five and 15 percentage points. Their ICSEAs fell below the average of 1000 by a minimum of 64 points to a maximum of 111 points. The largest Indigenous population within the sample schools was 32 per cent, and the smallest was five per cent. The school populations ranged from 169 to 869 with five of the schools being traditional year 7 to 12 secondary schools, and one being a preparatory year to year 12 school. Five of the schools were in rural locations with one school located in a metropolitan area. One of the schools (School C) attained a three-year attendance average (across 2014-2016: 91.5 per cent) that exceeded the current state school six-year average attendance rate of 91.2 per cent (Queensland Department of Education, 2019a).

Table 22 Part B selected schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
<th>School F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-year attendance average %</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>90.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3-year attendance average &gt;95%</th>
<th>52</th>
<th>49</th>
<th>48</th>
<th>45</th>
<th>44</th>
<th>42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICSEA</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Indigenous students</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout Part A of this study, it became evident that the three independent variables (ICSEA, Indigenous population and School size) presented weak relationships and therefore little consistent effect on student attendance averages.
Chapter 5. Part B: Data findings and discussion - collation of qualitative evidence and semi-structured interviews

The six schools detailed in Table 20 on p. 105 to be studied in Part B were selected to support greater understanding of the most effective strategies for enhancing school attendance in Queensland state secondary schools. Labelled schools A through F the school populations are diverse, and their individual contexts are interesting and varied. Their consistent attainment of attendance rates that exceed their peer schools and state and sample school averages is praiseworthy and was analysed following review of key school documents and completion of semi-structured interviews with the Principals. School documents that were reviewed prior to the interviews include school prospectus or enrolment information, responsible behaviour plan, school annual reports and other school specific promotional material or documents available on websites.

The location of five of the six schools rendered travel to interview the Principals unfeasible. In the interests of equity, it was decided that all interviews be conducted by phone, were recorded, and the recordings were transcribed by an engaged transcription service. The interviews were conducted in May, 2018. The interview transcriptions and the collated case notes from the document reviews were used to write the individual school case studies.

A deductive coding process (Miles et al., 2014) was applied to identify themes or consistent patterns to monitor throughout Part B of the study. This process was followed by coding according to the description of themes discovered in the interview cases studies (Creswell, 2014). The themes that emerged formed the basis for the identification of key practices that were consistently applied across these successful schools. These practices were aligned to levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to form the foundations of a model of student attendance improvement that is a product of this research study. It is intended that this model be shared within the education community to support improvement of student attendance rates within and across school systems.

Sub-questions designed to stimulate conversation with the Principals around the strategies and policy enactment that yielded success were constructed. The sub-questions for Part B were:

1. How do schools track and monitor student attendance within the immediate school setting (the student’s microsystem)?
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

2. What strategies do schools employ to engage with students’ families?
3. How do schools engage and collaborate with their community (the student’s mesosystem and exosystem) to improve student attendance?
4. How do schools recognise and reward excellent student attendance (building cultural values within the student’s macrosystem)?
5. What other strategies do schools employ to improve student attendance?

5.1 School A

Context
School A is located in a regional Queensland town and is classified as rural. The city relies on employment in crop farming and fishing with small manufacturing to support these major industries. School A’s Principal estimated that upwards of 70 per cent of the school families were involved in the city’s primary crop farming industry. The school population during the study was 507 and the school is a traditional state high school delivering Australian and Queensland curriculum for students in years 7-12. The ICSEA value of the school community was 920, which is 80 value points below the Australian average. Over the three years of the study School A attained an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent of 52 per cent, which is 15 percentage points above the sample schools’ average and is the highest rate of the Part B participant schools. The three-year average for student attendance was 90.6 per cent, and School A had an Indigenous student population of 19 per cent.

Prior to conducting the interview, a review of School A’s website including promotional material and prospectus found several key themes that were then looked for, for emphasis within the interview. A strong commitment to public education and continual reference to “success for all students” was evident in the prospectus. An explicit reference to the goal of attaining 95 per cent attendance rates for all students was clearly stated in School A’s enrolment literature package. A strong message of being in partnership with the community was clear and proud reference to decades of successful service to the local community was promoted as a key community asset.

The interview

Background
The Principal of School A through the years of the study was appointed to the school in 2012 and immediately noticed patterns of attendance that were concerning. Not only were the overall attendance rates for students and the school below state averages “… invariably into the mid to high eighties”, but unusual spikes in absence were also evident. The Principal investigated these instances and found several locally contextualised challenges that required overcoming to change
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

the culture of student attendance within the community. For example, one day he recalls having over 70 students absent and he learned that this was due to it being the first day of the local fishing season. He detailed discussing these patterns and the ensuing challenges with the school leadership team, and then seeking to implement several compliance-based processes that did not result in sustained improvement. He explained that punitive measures were ineffective “… if your attendance isn’t at this level, you can’t do this and you can’t do that. So that wasn’t making a dent …”

It was at this stage that the Principal and the school leadership team began to implement a new policy within the school named the “success for all students policy”. He described the policy as being “a different way of skinning a cat”. The policy was based on the premise that all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, and the community) want success for students, and that one of the best ways to achieve success was to have high levels of attendance. The Principal emphasised that the entire initiative revolved around building individual commitment to the learning process, not merely meeting a compliance expectation. It was promoted within the school to students and to parents that a 95 per cent attendance rate was the desirable target and that this percentage was the equivalent of an acceptable absence rate of ten days per school year with clearly defined acceptable absence examples. Students who did not meet the 95 per cent target could be at risk of losing non-compulsory privileges such as extra-curricular activity access. The Principal detailed “most people get 10 paid sick days a year”, and he sought to instill in students and parents a preparatory mindset for future life success by developing a habit of attendance in line with this societal norm. He emphasised at this point that the 10-day absence target was more of a conversation focus, rather than being built into the planned monitoring strategy. Later this would evolve and become a critical part of the school’s approach. The Principal and his team believed that “rather than using a big stick”, he had presented to parents “concern about their student’s ability to achieve”. The policy included a list for parents that detailed what constituted an acceptable absence and the Principal stated, “lots of parents, they’d never seen that before”. The implementation of the new policy through explicit communication was critical for success, and the Principal recalled how the team engaged in a great deal of work conducting “scenario lessons” to unpack the expectations with students.

During this stage of the interview the Principal went to lengths to share how he approached the policy through a “humanistic” focus with parents. He explained an example of a family sharing that a parent had been diagnosed with cancer and the family wished to take a holiday during school time, and he stressed how during such cases he waived any expectations. It was evident that the Principal of School A cared deeply about standards and results being attained, but wanted
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

to do so within a framework of care and compassion.

Tracking and monitoring student attendance

Teachers in School A marked students’ daily attendance using a commercial software system that exported the student data into the whole state of Queensland’s learning management system. The Principal described how delegating regular tracking of this data against the 95 per cent target became an onerous task for the Deputy Principals. It became a constant struggle to always be on top of who was below, at, or above the threshold and then to determine who could access which privileges. Not wishing to lose the momentum of understanding and action that was becoming evident within the student and parent community, the team resolved to home in on “this concept of 10 days off”. School leadership pivoted the process to be simpler and to use the language of “10 days” in all correspondence and in the tracking system that they devised. Instead of focusing on the accumulation of attendance and analysing it against the marker of 95 per cent or below, the school staff counted the number of days absent for each child, applying a traffic light system of red, yellow, and green to signal to students whether they were at risk of compromising their learning chances. Throughout the interview the Principal stressed how the approach the team took that continually referenced the language of “success for all students” greatly differed to their previous approach which translated to the community as punitive. The change in language and focus to look at students working with staff to ensure awareness of the patterns of their absence reaped rewards with School A children being acutely aware of their attendance responsibilities.

The Principal was extremely confident that students in the school could readily explain how the system worked and could detail the 10-day absence target. It was notable that during this section of the interview the Principal stated, “… over the last year and a half we’ve had a little bit of a drop off around attendance …”. School A’s 52 per cent attendance rate above 95 per cent over the three-year period (2014-16) comprised of yearly rates of 52, 54, and 49 per cent in respective order. It was impressive that the Principal was accurate and clear in his statement of the decline in data. He then went on to explain how the team had lost focus on the task because they felt that the gains had been made and that they “were travelling in a good space”. He reported that he had learned that it was necessary to “maintain the rage” and to continue to share the data with families by sending it home regularly because this was a practice that they (school staff) had become complacent with.

The Principal shared how they reflected on the most successful aspects of the strategy and that these facets revolved around constant reinforcement to students about the importance of excellent attendance habits on their learning. He stated that he believed they were most successful when
they had the “success for all students policy implanted inside the student planner”, and when they implemented strategies that supported students to be aware of their patterns of attendance and absence. A process of sharing student absence data with them on a five-weekly cycle is credited by the Principal with being of great success. At the end of every five week cycle each student within their form class was informed of their red, yellow, or green status and supported to understand the required steps to be taken to remedy or prevent moving to the next undesirable traffic light. This process is led by the two Deputy Principals and they then support a student support team to devise, enact, and review individual support plans that are enacted when attendance improvement is required. The individual support plans could involve home visits, modified learning pathways, and referral to professional support.

The student support team at School A was a significant investment to improve student attendance and learning engagement. The team was led by the Deputy Principals and consisted of a Community Education Counsellor, Youth Support Coordinator, School-Based Youth Health Nurse, School Chaplain, Guidance Officer, and Student Support Head of Department. This team met weekly to analyse the data, strategise for improvement, enact actions and interventions, and review progress. School A did not employ a dedicated Attendance Officer and had no plans to do so as the Principal indicated that the team approach was his preferred mode and that their success supported this perspective.

Engagement with community

An innovative and responsive way this school dealt with challenges in attendance rates is in how they responded to their large Indigenous student population’s representation in the red traffic light area. School A’s student population included 19 per cent Indigenous students who were initially over-represented in the red traffic light section of the school’s attendance tracking system. The Principal described how data analysis revealed to him that the school’s Indigenous student behaviour was “pretty much level with the non-Indigenous students” but there was a significant gap of “15-20 per cent” in attendance rates. He resolved to address this through a targeted intervention.

Working with the Community Education Counsellor who supported the Indigenous students, the Principal and the student support team devised a 25-day challenge to encourage target setting for improved attendance. The strategy was for targeted students to strive to “beat their attendance from the previous 25 days”. The Principal detailed how this strategy worked with students because it gave them a fair challenge. He stated, “we knew that probably we weren’t going to automatically turn around kids with 60 per cent attendance to 95 per cent attendance …” but that incremental
improvement from “… 12 out of 25 days to 15 out of 25 days” was desirable and achievable. A data wall was created so that the students could visually track their attendance patterns and gauge their progress towards their 25-day target, and the Community Education Counsellor supported the families with practical solutions to transport and financial barriers to attendance. Students who attained their target were rewarded with a small gesture such as a food voucher at the canteen.

Another strategy that significantly supported the Indigenous students at School A was the initiation of “yarn up meetings”. In this context, “yarn up meetings” fulfilled the role of Indigenous Australian storytelling that occurs within a democratic structure, giving each person a turn to speak and share their story (Carlson & Frazer, 2018). This culturally appropriate forum to share perspective in a safe space allowed School A’s Indigenous students to celebrate each other’s attendance improvement and discuss support for each other away from the pressure that larger forums may have imposed.

School A’s Principal also worked with local businesses to ensure that students were present at school during school hours and not truanting in local establishments. This initiative involved local businesses refusing to serve school aged children during school hours and although some larger businesses would not agree to participate, the Principal credits these partnerships as being a significant step towards supporting a whole of community approach to the attendance challenge. Businesses displayed a poster stating that they would not serve school children during school hours, on school days, and that they supported the “success for all students policy”.

Partnerships focused on learning opportunities for students also enabled students to have more diverse experiences and, thus, supported their interest and motivation to attend school. The Principal described a memorandum of understanding signed with a local gym that provided Certificate in Fitness Training opportunities for School A students with real clients, and an innovative Aquaculture Certificate that students accessed at a local reef industry business. Further development of vocational educational offerings with the local tertiary Technical and Further Education College were also credited by the Principal as providing students with diverse offerings, resulting in heightened school engagement and attendance.

Of interest was something that School A Principal did not reference. At no time throughout the interview did he mention the ICSEA value of the school. An ICSEA value of 920 is low compared to the national average of 1000. It was clear that a positive, aspirational mindset existed and contributed to the successful attainment of the attendance rates at School A, rather than bemoaning lack of community capital and other barriers that may have impeded success.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

**Recognising and rewarding excellent student attendance**

Attendance reward strategies enacted by School A included those attained by students meeting targets such as the 25-day challenge, alongside more traditional offerings such as highest attendance class for the week in year levels, outstanding attendance for students who kept at or below the 10-day absence target, and the perfect attendance award certificates for students who attain 100 per cent attendance. The Principal explained an interaction he had with a group of students who were unclear why they would be rewarded for attending school diligently as they saw this as something they should be doing as a matter of course. The Principal described explaining to students that certificates for attendance could be inserted in their curriculum vitae, and he explicitly drew the link for them between a six-year pattern of excellent attendance at school and how positive this would look to a prospective employer. He credits this type of real-life explicit experience for his students as partly contributing to the positive attendance culture at School A.

An activity called ‘the Big Day Out” was an extremely popular end of year event at School A. The Principal shared that students in years 7-9 who met the attendance target qualified to participate in a fun, end of year carnival on-site. Students in years 10-11 negotiated a different reward, for example, a free swim day at the community pool. Students in year 12 were rewarded with the privilege of their formal graduation dance and other extra graduation activities. The Principal went to lengths to ensure that it was clear that all these privileges are key components of the “success for all students policy” because the commitment to learning and a successful future must precede any extra privileges. Students could also earn “Hawk points” for meeting attendance thresholds within the school’s reward system that accrued for use to attain privileges.

**Other strategies**

The Principal of School A reported no other significant strategies employed at the school to improve student attendance.

5.2 School B

**Context**

School B is located in a regional Queensland town and is classified as rural. The city relies on employment in one major crop farming industry with several smaller industries supporting this one major endeavour. School B’s Principal described the school as being attractive to families in the area due to its small size and ability to personalise learning for students. The school population during the study was 256 and the school is a traditional state high school delivering Australian and Queensland curriculum for students in years 7-12. The ICSEA value of the school community
was 936, which is 64 value points below the Australian average. The three-year average for student attendance was 90.8 per cent, and School B included an Indigenous student population of 11 per cent. Over the three years of the study School B attained an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent of 49 per cent, being 12 percentage points above the sample schools’ average and the second highest rate attained by Part B participant schools.

A review of School B’s website and promotional material including the school prospectus was conducted prior to the interview. This review revealed a commitment to a “learning, performance and citizenship” focus that was referenced throughout the documentation. Within the citizenship component five C’s – common sense, courtesy, consideration, cooperation, and commitment were emphasised as core school values. The prospectus described a strong academic record and referenced the school’s pride as an integral part of the local community. An expectation of excellent attendance, a clear statement of how students receive rewards for excellent attendance (platinum and gold awards for 100 per cent and above 97 per cent respectively), and sanctions for low attendance (below 85 per cent) was contained within the prospectus. The whole school target of 95 per cent attendance was detailed within the prospectus.

*The interview*

**Background**

The Principal of School B was appointed in 2016 joining the school in the final year of the study’s data sample. The previous Principal led the school for three years. The Principal described how the school’s data within the study was the culmination of a five-year journey that staff at the school had been working on. He described a transient community with many seasonal working families who enrolled then departed in rhythm with the cropping calendar. School B also consisted of long-term enrolled students who in previous years had been heavily involved with their family’s farming businesses and thus could often be required to work and miss school. The Principal reported that this was less of a factor than it had been in previous years and was an interesting change to community dynamics. He detailed how more divergent crops were starting to be grown in the district which was an interesting factor as they planned future school strategy. At time of interview (2018) the Principal reported the current school attendance outcomes as being slightly down from previous years.

**Tracking and monitoring student attendance**

To initially ensure accurate tracking and monitoring of student attendance the Principal shared how the first step was diligent roll marking by class teachers. He described how class teachers were also the “first port of call in following up on attendance” within their classes. The Principal
viewed their size as a relatively small school as a positive asset due to the ability to have an Attendance Officer who knew all the children. The Attendance Officer at School B was stationed at the front reception of the school for the first hour of each day. When students submitted notes for early departure permission or to sign in late the Attendance Officer was “… the first person they speak to …” and this makes it difficult for students to “… escape the idea that attendance will be followed up on”. It was noted that the Attendance Officer was also the school’s Youth Support Coordinator (YSC). This doubling of roles was initially required because of the school’s small size and subsequent lack of breadth of centralised allocation of resources. The Principal went on to state how this had become a strong positive for attendance and engagement initiatives because one staff member was able to build excellent relationships with the students for all student welfare matters. The Principal also detailed the effectiveness of School B’s Year Level Coordinator (YLC) team.

The YLC team held responsibility for tracking student attendance patterns and for following up when the matter was more serious than day-to-day absences that class teachers addressed. The school utilised a simple excel spreadsheet to track and monitor all students’ attendance patterns. An office staff member was tasked with entering the data and disseminating the summary for each year level once a week to the YLCs and all staff to peruse and action. Students were made aware of their individual attendance rates in care classes each Thursday and in year level assemblies on Fridays, and if they were not engaged with the YSC or YLC due to intervention needs (below 85 per cent), their attendance outcomes were monitored by their care teacher. School B’s team to track and monitor student attendance was the “support services team”. The Principal was proud that this team and the teaching team “are not separate entities, they really cross over and there is a lot of combined learning that goes on”. He reiterated the importance of leveraging their small size to build a community of adults who work closely together to benefit their students. The support services team was made up of the Deputy Principal, YLCs, Attendance Officer/YSC, Community Education Counsellor, two Indigenous Education Workers, and the Guidance Officer. This team met regularly to analyse data trends and devise interventions for attendance improvement.

Engagement with community
The Principal was clear and explicit in explaining that the school existed in partnership with the local community. He shared that the community framework of LPC (learning, performance, and citizenship) “is the way we explain what our school is about … to our community”. The school sought to inculcate in students a commitment to their community through development of a set of personal values and beliefs that supported a commitment to their own and collective learning, a
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

desire to achieve performance reflective of one’s potential, and actions that demonstrate an understanding of one’s responsibility to be an exemplary citizen. The Principal continually referred to excellent attendance as a key tenet of the LPC framework.

Within the learning domain of LPC, students, families and the community cooperated to afford students the opportunity to pursue educational pathways, both academic and vocational. The performance domain committed to high expectations, recognition of success and delivery by the school of resourcing and opportunity for students that allowed them to excel. Within the citizenship domain, LPC required all within the School B community to live up to the five C’s (common sense, courtesy, consideration, cooperation, commitment), for all to engage with and celebrate cultural differences, and to nurture pride in being a member of School B’s community. Again, the Principal reinforced the intertwined nature of excellent attendance and achievement of the LPC framework as a daily lived experience for School B students, staff, and community members.

Practical initiatives enacted to embed the LPC framework in student life and thus have a positive impact on student attendance include the school’s focus on developing Agribusiness as a signature practice within curriculum offerings. The Principal reported the Agribusiness partnership with the Technical and Further Education College as “… connecting with the community in a very strong way …”, and commented that such partnerships “bring out the relevance of what we’re doing” so that students see the real-life application of their endeavours. Another burgeoning partnership recalled by the Principal was in the field of ICT and farming technology. He explained how several of the local farms had begun to work with regional feeder universities to implement robot technology in their operations, and that this was an exciting opportunity a small number of students were beginning to access. He expressed optimism about the future of this initiative and linked the introduction of these offerings to their attendance outcome improvement. The Principal concluded this line of discussion by expressing confidence that “our community understand what LPC is about”.

Breakfast club is an initiative that was introduced at School B to support students who either do not have breakfast prior to arriving at school or have breakfast extremely early due to work commitments on their family farm. The student services support team designed a space for students to have breakfast in what was a “pleasant environment” with the goal to make it “a bit of a social thing”. The Principal described the students as being a “captive audience”, improving the chances of them being engaged with their schooling experience and thus staying throughout the day to learn.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

One area that the Principal detailed clear opportunity to improve current practices was in the current links with the local Indigenous community. He had recently employed two Indigenous Education Workers to support students who were over-represented in lower attendance outcome bands.

**Recognising and rewarding excellent student attendance**

The Principal described the thresholds of attendance tracking: below 85 per cent incurring sanctions on participation in extra-curricular activities (without an “exceptional cause”), between 85 and 90 per cent requiring a meeting with the YLC to explain one’s status, and above 90 per cent being acceptable. To gain an “exceptional cause” approval a student must meet with the Principal and discuss their personal circumstances. He was confident that all School B students would be able to explain the thresholds and the consequences for each. He detailed community events, including the local ball, and end of year senior privileges, as being excellent events to leverage school attendance expectations against. The Principal stressed that students really wanted to attend these events and would try to meet the attendance expectations as a result. One strategy the Principal detailed as being successful was enrolling student leaders in the promotion of the ball and in the physical selling of the tickets to include students in the process, building their commitment.

The YLC team applied end-of-term rewards for the best attended class in each year level. These rewards varied from a class pizza party to an excursion to a local sporting facility for a fun day out. The Principal commented that this strategy had been successful with School B’s students because the reward “targeted specifically towards those kids in those year levels”. He detailed how students were consulted with on the object of their reward target and that this ownership supported their engagement. The Principal described end of term individual certificates that were also awarded for students who met the whole school target of 90 per cent, 95 per cent plus, and 100 per cent.

Differentiation of intervention strategy for students in junior years (7-9) and senior years (10-12) was detailed by the Principal as being required to “… create a habit because once kids pick up a habit it’s so easy to keep that going”. He continued to describe the importance of linking the attendance objective of attaining a 95 per cent average with the LPC framework, reinforcing that the whole purpose was to instill in students a personal commitment that led to personal action.

**Other strategies**

When asked about other strategies the Principal referenced School B’s fortune to be situated in a
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

small, rural community, citing that it is the “personal connection and the direct connection to families that makes a huge difference”. The Principal did not reference the school community ICSEA value, nor mention any local challenge or impediment to improving student attendance and learning outcomes for the students. There was a positivity and optimism in the messaging throughout the interview. He finished the interview with this clear statement about the way that a team approach had benefited their students:

“It is about engaging people through a group of individuals rather than through one because, as you would understand, kids relate to some people better than others”.

5.3 School C

Context

School C is in a regional Queensland town and is classified as rural. The town is a coastal one with a large proportion of the population engaged in either the fishing industry or cropping industry that are central to the ongoing viability of the community. During the period of the study the population of the school was 869 and the school enrolled students from year 7 through to year 12 in traditional Australian and Queensland state high school curriculum delivery. Uniquely, the school campus also hosts the Technical and Further Education College for the community, providing avenues of vocational study for students both enrolled in the school and post-school after they graduate. This dual campus mode differed from the other schools in the sample group, who whilst offering diverse pathways for students in the form of access to vocational courses, did so in partnership with providers of these courses, they did not serve as the Technical and Further Education College.

The ICSEA value of School C was 889 which is 111 points below the Australian average. During the three-year study period School C recorded an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent of 48 per cent which was the third highest attained rate of the Part B participant schools. This average is 11 percentage points above the sample schools’ average. The three-year average for student attendance was 91.5 per cent which was the highest rate attained by the Part B participant schools. The proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at School C was 32 per cent which is the highest rate within the sample group of Part B schools.

A review of School C’s website and publicly available material revealed description of a coherent approach to managing student attendance. The enrolment agreement between School C and families referenced a strong commitment to higher achievement leading to more diverse
employment opportunities, financial independence, and increased overall wellbeing. The school’s published attendance policy was comprehensive and detailed the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders in student’s schooling. These included the school, student, and parent/carer, and student and family access to support mechanisms available at the school including the Guidance Officer, School Nurse, Chaplain, and faculty staff. Explicit reference to students being required to attend regularly and on time, and to the individual and school target of 95 per cent attendance, a school practice of recording all student attendance at the 15-minute point of every lesson, and specific detailing of mailing five-weekly individual student attendance reports to all families was clear in the policy. School C regularly reinforced the importance of high levels of student attendance in key documents and communication to families. The school attendance policy provided a clear description of School C’s philosophy towards, and management of, student attendance.

The interview

Background

The Principal of School C was appointed to the position in 2012. Prior to this she had served as Deputy Principal in the school since 1999. With a long-term tenure in the school as Deputy Principal then Principal, the School C’s Principal provided an almost two-decade perspective on how the community had developed changing attitudes toward attendance at school. She described an interesting dynamic that she observed as “two journeys …… not in parallel.” She noted that when she arrived at the school in 1999 it was parents who had the strongest positive views towards their children attending school, and that the school was passive without any specific attendance maintenance or improvement strategies. Over time she said this position reversed and, as community attitudes towards ensuring high student attendance rates declined, the school had adopted a more proactive and diligent approach. She stated that the community started to “care a little bit less about student attendance” and then in response “the effect on schools was to care a whole lot more about it”. The Principal described the journey to improvement in student attendance as a very challenging process with the community, whereby it was not just students they were feeling pressure from but “it is the adults who are pushing back against us too”.

Tracking and monitoring student attendance

To track and monitor student attendance the Principal of School C described the introduction of a commercial software attendance roll marking system. She was explicit in stating that roll marking occurs in all five lessons every day and that this is a whole school priority and expectation “… no matter what else happens in class, they take the attendance of the class”. The Principal went on to detail the unique practice of using the class intercom system to broadcast a direction
at the 15-minute mark of periods one and two for all teachers to mark the student roll in their classes. The message was broadcast by the school Attendance Officer. The Principal continued to explain “initially I thought that might be a bit intrusive in our classrooms, but when we stopped doing it after the first term … teachers asked that we return to doing that …”. The Principal explained that the thinking behind the very public reminder was to enable the school to be certain that they had accurate data to share with families about which students were absent at the start of each day, and the obvious purpose of reminding staff to fulfill this responsibility. Text messages were then sent to families of students who were absent without prior notification to the school. The responses of parents to the text messages were entered as data into the school management system to support decision-making around further steps required to support any patterns of absence.

A whole school and individual student attendance target of 95 per cent was communicated by the Principal as being well known and clearly understood by the community. She stated that one of the strong facets of the school’s practice had been the adoption of the same 95 per cent target by the school’s nine main feeder primary schools. The Principal was confident that students and families knew that the attendance target was 95 per cent and that other communication strategies supported this message. These included a five-weekly individual student attendance report that was mailed to each family detailing the student’s current attendance rate. The evolution of this report introduced in 2013 was of most interest. The Principal shared that the report started out as “a bit juvenile” in that it consisted of the student’s attendance rate accompanied by a “very large smiley face or frowny face”. She outlined how when they first introduced the reports, she had personally written the attendance rates on the individual student reports and that the respective face (smiley or frowny) reported to students and their families whether the student was on track to meet the attendance target. The reports evolved to be a more sophisticated description of the student’s attendance status and were presently compiled with a mail merge process by the Attendance Officer and Administrative Assistants.

Weekly assembly announcements of student attendance cohort rates and patterns occurred to spotlight the progress towards targets. The Principal detailed using data sets “to engage the kids” and this included doing “silly things like, you know, boys versus girls … one class versus another class” and a gender rate comparison in every year level so the students knew the patterns every week. It was not evident that there was an expectation that the staff in charge of the assembly provided the same splits of data sets each week, rather, it was described that staff had the autonomy to choose interesting and fun ways to engage their respective year level.
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A further strategy was the creation of an internal year level weekly report that shared important data on students with their teachers. This report written by the respective Head of Year and the Year Level Coordinator noted student achievement, behaviour, and attendance patterns, flagging concerns for relevant staff to act upon. The Principal explained that the report contained points of any “considerable concern, and one of those triggers that gets them on there is attendance …”. She then detailed that the student would be assigned a case manager and the team responsible for supporting the students in the respective year level would devise an intervention plan to support the student. The Principal stressed the individual nature of the intervention to improve student attendance “… because you can’t fix it on a holistic level.” It was noteworthy that the meetings to support the creation of the report and the subsequent actions to address individual student concerns occurred every week.

A strong team approach was evident in the description of strategy to support student attendance improvement at School C although the Principal did not refer to a named “attendance team”. Staff designated to support student attendance included the Attendance Officer, Community Education Counsellor, two Youth Support Coordinators, Heads of Year, Year Level Coordinators, Guidance Officer, Deputy Principals, and class teachers.

**Engagement with community**

A range of strategies to engage with the local community were shared by the Principal of School C. When asked if there was an overarching program or project that contributed to the attendance rates at the school the Principal replied, “I don’t think so. It’s just about trying to connect with the community”. Later in the interview she stated, “it sounds really corny, but it is basically whatever it takes”.

A process called “JET” (Junior Education and Training) planning occurred for all students in years 7-10. The process consisted of a termly (four times a year) meeting between the student, their parents, and the Head of Year or Year Level Coordinator. The Principal detailed the frustration she felt when prior to this process being introduced they would “interview them all in grade six … then often you don’t shake the parents’ hand again until graduation day, so we needed to break that down.” The Principal shared that the “JET” planning meeting was not a standard parent-teacher interview about progress against curriculum but was about the child’s future aspirations and their social adjustment at school “to get a good overall picture of the things parents want to know”. This included a discussion on attendance, and the Principal credited this process with supporting community understanding of the need for excellent rates of attendance.
The school’s Indigenous student population was 32 per cent and a community-wide project to support students to connect with culture was introduced. The project was branded as a school community connection initiative, and the Principal reflected that it was difficult and took time to establish trusting partnerships with local elders and significant community figures. She explained that elders were present in the school once a week and that they ran a program to immerse students in the traditional cultural values of their local peoples. The Principal believed that facilitating student connection to “where they are from” taught Indigenous students values of “personal respect and cultural respect”. This program also aimed to develop future community Indigenous leaders within a cyclical sustainability model. The Principal was optimistic that the program would have significant long-term benefits for the local Indigenous community.

A program the Principal credited with educating the wider community (specifically the smaller communities with Primary schools that feed into School C) was the “Hotshots” transition program. She detailed a rise of enrolment from School C’s feeder schools from 40 per cent up to a yearly average of 100 per cent. Planned curriculum days on key learning areas, and targeted acceleration opportunities for high-achieving students, introduced Primary school students and their families to School C prior to enrolment. The Principal proudly stated that School C had become “the academic school of choice”. She shared a further strategy that she also credited with supporting overall school climate improvement. The Principal described the deliberate introduction of “a walking tour” as the first step in the orientation program for prospective year 7 enrolments, “it’s just purely a tour, a walk and tour of our campus”. School C’s Principal explained that the simplicity of walking with students and families and sharing the values, facilities and feel of the campus had played a part in engendering commitment to School C’s values during this important transition phase.

A range of programs that have been designed over time to cater for the needs of the local community included the purposeful introduction of student learning courses that met local labour needs. An example was the construction of a working hospital ward and dental consultation practice in School C to train future professionals in these fields due to an identified local skill shortage. The Principal of School C outlined how the local hospital and aged care centre had difficulty recruiting staff, so they worked in partnership to train these from within. She credits students being able to see the tangible end goal of their prospective effort as improving attendance and commitment to learning. The Principal explained that School C had introduced a logistics course to support local businesses that had entered this industry and introduced an onsite community restaurant staffed by teachers overseeing student trainees. She enthusiastically described this venture, “seriously, it’s the best restaurant in town.” The School C restaurant was
open for six months of the year on Friday night only. Students completed a Hospitality Certificate and Responsible Service of Alcohol qualification along with their other school subjects. The Principal credited the restaurant initiative as developing strong school attendance commitment from the involved students.

**Recognising and rewarding excellent student attendance**

When asked to share the strategies that School C employed to recognise and reward excellent student attendance the Principal of School C responded, “precious little. When I saw that question, I thought oh my goodness, we don’t do very much.” She went on to detail how aware she was that some schools provide students with vouchers and certificates “… but we don’t do anything except to recognise them. We recognise them at parades.” Further questioning on what the recognition at parades looked like established that students with excellent attendance “just get a clap”. She continued to explain that there is also no loss of privilege for not meeting targets and the whole school and community philosophy around high levels of attendance is to “just tell the kids it’s the right thing to do so you need to do it.”

**Other strategies**

School C uses a unique approach to the deployment of a centrally provided staffing resource named Youth Support Coordinator (YSC). The YSC is usually deployed to support secondary school students, proactively and reactively, experiencing social, emotional, and physical barriers to their learning. The Principal of School C explicitly detailed how the school utilised its two YSCs in an academic coaching role working with small groups of students to guide their learning progress, less so than supporting their welfare. The Principal detailed that this “case management” approach with a focus on the supported student’s academic progress, rather than just emotional state, had been highly effective in building student commitment to study.

A further strategy that the Principal of School C credited as supporting attendance improvement at the school was an extremely flexible approach to the school timetable for senior school students (years 11 and 12). She emphasised, “we’ve got kids in the wackiest timetables.” She described how students can access subjects at times that fit in with their needs, “we have got lessons that sit in the timetable and lessons that sit outside the timetable”. The Principal stated that they were able to offer students access to the courses that enabled them to graduate successfully, but they did so without adhering to traditionally stringent timetabling conventions. This flexibility of staff provision extended to offering students and their families free after-school cooking classes. The Principal referred to School C as “the centre of community life”, and linked this outcome to the connection students and families felt to the school.
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5.4 School D

Context

School D is in a regional Queensland town and is classified as rural. The town is an inland mining town with most of the working population engaged in either the primary mining industry or secondary industries that support mining. School D was the smallest school in Part B of the study with a population of 169 students. The school enrolled students from year 7 through to year 12 in traditional Australian and Queensland state high school curriculum delivery. A significant number of students (almost 40 per cent) travelled into the township on buses each day from outlying properties and smaller localities.

The ICSEA value of School D was 935 which is 65 points below the Australian average. During the three-year study period, School D recorded an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent of 45 per cent which is the fourth highest rate attained by Part B participant schools. This average is eight percentage points above the sample schools’ average. The three-year average for student attendance was 90.8 per cent. The proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at School D was 12 per cent. The Principal of School D was appointed to the position in 2018, just prior to the recording of the interview. Prior to this he had served as a Head of Department in the school and was a staff member from the last year of the sample data period (2016).

School D published a comprehensive attendance policy on the school website. The policy contained explicit statements about the school’s commitment to student attendance as a priority, and described the positive learning and social benefits of regular attendance. The attendance policy referenced policy “expectations” of students, parent/guardians, and staff. The use of the terminology of “expectations” was different to other school policies that referred to “responsibilities”. The policy stated the processes for student attendance case management if individual student attendance rates fell below the threshold of 85 per cent, and the celebration opportunities students would experience if upper thresholds of 95 and 100 per cent attendance were attained.

The School D student enrolment prospectus made explicit reference to “student attendance” as a core priority of the school. Significant explanation for students and families on the importance of adhering to procedures to report and explain absence from school is evident in the prospectus. This explanation included notes on “late arrival to school” and “early departure from school”, and how absence trends can negatively affect student participation in extra-curricular activities.
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The interview

Background

The Principal of School D described the historical state of attendance data at the school, referring to the work of the previous Principal as being pivotal to the evident improvement. He shared that the process of focusing on and deliberately strategising to improve attendance began in 2011/2012. The previous Principal had led a process of significant reform and improvement across many domains of school measurement and had been promoted to a larger school as result. School D’s Principal detailed the changes that had occurred in the town due to a downturn in mining activity during the previous decade. This had led to a loss of students and sense of negativity within the district and town. He listed student attendance percentages for the years prior to the study sample years as being in the mid to high 80’s, compared to the current rates (at time of interview) of 93 per cent whole school attendance and a below 85 per cent attendance percentage of “only 14 per cent”. He referred to a “long journey” the school had taken to attain this attendance rate.

Tracking and monitoring student attendance

Attendance tracking and monitoring at School D commenced with the completion of daily recording and tracking by administration officers who ensured that recorded absences (in electronically marked rolls completed by teachers) were pursued for verification. This process involved the distribution of automatic text messages to families whose child’s absence was yet to be explained. When this process was complete, the remaining unexplained absences were followed up upon by either the senior school or junior school Head of Department.

A fortnightly meeting occurred with the junior and senior school student services teams. At this meeting student attendance patterns were monitored and any student with an attendance percentage below 85 per cent for the previous fortnightly period was noted for case management. The process of case management was managed by an assigned Head of Department, Year Level Coordinator, Guidance Officer or Head of Special Education Services. A program of support was devised to action appropriate strategies to improve the student’s attendance. The Principal of School D explained that the described case management process was the reactive arm of a strategy named the “Right on Track” program.

The “Right on Track” program was a strategy designed to ensure that every senior student in the school was “on track” for success with the graduating qualification in Queensland secondary schools, the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). The Principal of School D credited the “Right on Track” program with raising the profile of attendance as a vehicle to achieving
successful graduation. The Principal declared that the program was well socialised throughout the community and the students at School D clearly understood the obligations they were required to meet to be on track to successfully graduate. Describing the process of program implementation as one where key school staff meet once per term with students to “look at not just their attendance data but also their subject data, their apprenticeships, and traineeships, to make sure they are on track …”, the Principal of School D emphasised the “really close contact with parents” and the “positive case management of those students” as being key to increasing the school’s attendance rate.

The School D attendance target of 92.5 per cent was publicised to the community, but the Principal explained that he was more confident that students would be able to recall that their attendance must be above 90 per cent. He stated, “I’d be confident that they would understand that attendance is a key part of our agenda”, and when asked if students would know their own individual attendance rate, he replied, “I’d be confident they’d know”. Each student in School D was required to complete a personal data tracking sheet in their individual hard copy school diary. On Tuesday morning in care class each student was provided with their attendance rate, and they inputted this into their diary. This strategy was employed to heighten student understanding and ownership of their attendance patterns and to apply consistency to the process by doing it each Tuesday. The Principal shared that he or his colleague leaders could “go to a care class on a Tuesday morning … and we could check any student’s diary … to see that attendance is being tracked.”

Engagement with community

The Principal of School D described a productive and positive relationship between the school, the parents of the school, and the broader local community. He detailed how it was a core value of his leadership to invite the community to be part of the life of the school to “build rapport”. A successful strategy that the Principal was proud of was a component of the “Right on Track” program that linked School D with local businesses, the dominant mining industry, destination universities, the Australian Defence Force, and other organisations that support productive pathways for local students. An increase in the number of students commencing school-based apprenticeships or traineeships had been realised in recent years following a concerted effort to forge such partnerships. When explaining the “Right on Track” program, the Principal of School D stated, “one of the key strategies for us is building those connections with the community through work experience, apprenticeships, traineeships ….”. A popular subject among students at School D was Hospitality Studies. One of the events students in this class were able to hold was an annual business luncheon. All local business supporters of the school were invited to a semi-
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formal luncheon to celebrate their commitment and contribution to School D, and to continue to foster the community connection that the Principal credited with increasing student attitudes towards regular attendance.

School D had an Indigenous student population of 12 per cent and the Principal shared strategies that supported these students to attend school regularly. Engagement with the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation which is a not-for-profit trust established in Queensland to support the education and future of Indigenous youth (QATSIF. The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation, 2021) had proven successful. The Principal outlined several links the school had made with support services for Indigenous families and youth to help the families connect with their culture, minimise barriers to student access to school, and to maximise commitment to regular attendance. The Principal of School D did not report a close connection or significant strategy of working with local Indigenous elder groups.

Recognising and rewarding excellent student attendance

Strategies that recognised and rewarded excellent student attendance at School D included an end-of-term reward day for students who attained the school attendance target, acknowledgement of individual and class/cohort target attainment on weekly assemblies, and a whole school celebration event named the “barbeque for being here”. This event was held at the beginning of school terms one, two and three to celebrate the students who had attained the whole school attendance target of 95 per cent in the previous term. Attaining students and their parents were invited to the celebration, and in recent times the school was required to split the event into junior and senior years to accommodate the large numbers. Students who attained 100 per cent attendance (as well as being acknowledged at the “barbeque for being here”) received a letter of congratulations accompanying their end of semester report card.

Other strategies

School D’s Principal elaborated on three key school improvement strategies that he also credited with building a culture of attendance at the school. Firstly, he outlined the journey the school had been on over a six-year period to establish a strong curriculum and pedagogy foundation using an explicit instruction teaching model and an evidenced-based reading program. During this recent period, School D had been a “lighthouse school” for professional sharing and modelling of excellent practices and this excitement and collegiality formed a strong base for the enactment of attendance improvement strategies as the staff were committed to excellence and continuous improvement. The Principal explained that the identification of the link between engaging lessons and student attendance, and the high-quality provision they were delivering, had been a significant
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factor in their attendance rate increases.

The second strategy was a purposeful improvement of Schools D’s classroom music program. Previously, the school had lost enrolments to boarding schools in nearby larger centres, and lack of quality music teaching provision had been identified as a contributing factor. School D’s leadership team applied for grants and sourced appropriately trained and talented staff to improve the music provision. This improvement led to a thriving vocal group which doubled in size within two years.

The third aspect described by the Principal of School D was the effect the physical school environment had on student belonging to the school. The Principal said, “Our facility officer and our grounds officer are two of the most important people in our school”. He described his philosophy on the importance of providing an “engaging environment and a lovely environment” so that the spaces in the school were ones where the “kids are happy to sit and enjoy themselves”. He referred to the creation and maintenance of “genuine respect” between the staff and students, and felt confident that the “little things” that the staff did to support students and make them feel welcome and cared for at School D had contributed to its attendance rate attainment.

5.5 School E

Context

School E is in the Queensland capital city and is classified as metropolitan. The school is in a suburb within 15 kilometres of the city’s central business district. Families of the school were employed in a broad range of jobs with no dominant role nor industry. School E had a population of 612 students and the school enrolled students from year 7 through to year 12 in traditional Australian and Queensland state high school curriculum delivery. School E’s population consisted of students from more than 50 different cultural backgrounds, and the school’s curriculum delivery and offered programs reflected a commitment to inclusion and respect for diversity.

The ICSEA value of School C was 911 which is 89 points below the Australian average. During the three-year study period School E recorded an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent of 44 per cent which is seven percentage points above the sample schools’ average and was the fifth highest rate attained by Part B participant schools. The three-year average for student attendance was 90.4 per cent. The proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at School D was seven per cent which is the smallest number of the Part B schools.

A review of publicly available school literature found a clear commitment to a school attendance
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target of 92 per cent. Within the school’s attendance policy, a description of the number of days absent that this percentage equated to over a term, semester, and year laid out clear guidance for students and families. The responsibilities of the school, students, and parents in relation to attendance at school was detailed and clear. Reference to Principal rewards for attendance, and the goal to create and maintain a disciplined teaching environment to raise achievement and attendance, and reference to how regular attendance supported students to achieve “school readiness” was evident.

The interview
Background
The Principal of School E was appointed in the first year of the study in late 2014. She explained that at this time there had been a decline in enrolment over previous years, and as School E was located in an urban area with neighbouring competing schools there was real concern within the community that it may be deemed unviable and close. A neighbouring school had closed in the previous decade, so the parent body felt that a precedent had been set and that closure was a genuine possibility. The Principal of School E described low morale and low optimism for the school’s future. She went on to elaborate that she viewed her task as new leader as “reigniting people’s beliefs” and “to get the fundamentals right”. She embarked on leading her team to gain momentum with school achievement and to create an ethos that supported students to want to be at school. The school attendance rate sat in the mid 80 per cent range and the Principal targeted improvement of this as one key marker along the improvement journey.

Tracking and monitoring student attendance
School E did not previously employ a dedicated staff member to manage and support student attendance prior to the Principal’s appointment. The Principal of School E referred to employing an Attendance Officer as one of her first acts upon commencement. Detailing that there were “so many kids coming to school late”, she believed that a dedicated staff member could support attendance improvement. The Attendance Officer’s role was to complete administrative tasks including checking data entry accuracy into the commercial roll marking software, monitoring the distribution of late and absence communication to parents, and physically checking that targeted students were in class. The Deputy Principals and the Attendance Officer met weekly to review patterns and trends, and to highlight students requiring intervention support. Students requiring attendance support were referred to the support services team to devise a program of intervention and support. The School E support services team consisted of Year Level Coordinators, Guidance Officer, Youth Pathways Coordinator, Chaplain, School-based Police
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Officer, School-based Youth Health Nurse, Teachers, and the Deputy Principals.

Weekly reports were prepared by the Attendance Officer for Deputy Principals to analyse trends and target areas requiring celebration or improvement. The Principal shared that School E placed a strong public focus on collective ownership of class and year level cohort data, and that students were encouraged to independently own their individual attendance patterns and rate. The school had acquired and installed an application on the school network that appeared on the dashboard page once students logged on to their individual devices. This application showed the student’s current attendance rate. Form class teachers were tasked with discussing individual student’s attendance rates with them to highlight the school target, the positive effects of regular attendance, and the negative effects of regular absence.

The Principal of School E described how her and the leadership team continually emphasised to students the importance of meeting, then exceeding the state average of attendance. She was not confident that students would immediately know the school target was 92 per cent if asked, but was sure they would know that attendance is a school priority and that the school expectation is that they seek to exceed the (undefined) state average. At weekly assemblies, a friendly competition between year levels had been established by reading out the year level attendance rates each week in rank order. Publishing the current school attendance rate and highlighting cohort attendance achievements occurred in the school newsletter to inform the community.

Engagement with community

“It’s around building a culture around how attendance is important for learning” is how the Principal of School E commenced discussing community engagement strategies. She stated that she spoke of the importance of regular attendance at every interface with the community to draw attention to the issue. She utilised the school newsletter to highlight attendance and explained that staff commenced parent-teacher meetings with an initial discussion of attendance patterns prior to discussing progress. School E held a series of parent interaction events throughout the year to bring parents into the school and to enrol them in their children’s educational journey. These started with a welcome barbeque at the start of the year, through to term and year level specific events to inform of important information relevant to key junctures.

As a school with a diverse population, School E’s Principal placed importance on the inclusion of all families in the life of the school. She detailed how strategies such as before school breakfast club, after school homework club, engagement with the Muslim Women’s Association, local community, church, and business group outreach had improved the connection between the
school and the local community. The homework club had seen a significant increase in attendance, “when I first started there were maybe six or seven kids and now there is about 80 kids … three afternoons a week”. The Principal of School E spoke with passion and commitment when she referred to the diverse range of students under her care. She frequently acknowledged the challenging circumstances in which many of her students lived, yet she did not state this in the form of excuse nor barrier to improvement.

A community partnership with a local early childhood education provider had been forged that allowed School E students access to high quality training, and the Principal credited this program with increasing student engagement with the school. Similarly, the major local university provided outreach programs for students to inspire in them the goal of attending university, and to prepare them for when they did graduate and enrol. Within both partnerships, the school’s large multicultural population and smaller Indigenous population were supported by either school-based or externally sourced support staff to aid their participation in culturally appropriate ways.

Recognising and rewarding excellent student attendance
School E applied a range of celebration and acknowledgement strategies to recognise and reward student attendance. The Principal described how the previously noted weekly assembly rank ordering competition culminated in a cohort winner at the end of each term. The winning cohort was rewarded with a food-based celebration event at the end of term. Students who attained the attendance target received a “positive postcard” detailing their achievement and were invited to a cohort specific end-of-semester reward day, and students who attained 100 per cent attendance were personally acknowledged with an attendance attainment certificate at a formal assembly. The end of semester reward day was a negotiated event between the students and teachers of the respective cohort. Teachers and students would discuss, then choose an appropriate reward activity that students would then work towards achieving access to. The Principal of School E credited this aspect of student agency as being pivotal in the success of the school’s attendance improvement journey.

Other strategies
The Principal of School E shared that a deliberate focus on ensuring that all learning time was maximised right through to the end of each school term was enacted. In practice, this strategy extended assessment submission and exam blocks to as close to the final day of term as practicably possible to reduce any chance of “down time” creeping into the calendar. The Principal explained that if students knew they were required to be at school for mandated assessment, then they would not take the final days off due to the perception that attendance was a wasteful use of their time.
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5.6 School F

Context
School F is located in a coastal north Queensland town and is classified as rural. Families of the school are employed in the major primary industry of farming. School F had a population of 275 students and was the only primary and secondary (P-12) campus within the Part B school sample delivering traditional Australian and Queensland curriculum. The proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at School F was 24 per cent. The ICSEA value of School F was 927 which is 73 points below the Australian average. During the three-year study period, School F recorded an average rate of attendance above 95 per cent of 42 per cent which is five percentage points above the sample schools’ average and the lowest rate attained by Part B participant schools. The three-year average for student attendance was 90.2 per cent.

A review of School F’s publicly available literature found reference to the expectation that School F students “attend school every day”. The processes enacted to support student attendance rate improvement were detailed in the enrolment information available to prospective parents. This included a document detailing examples of the cumulative impact of missing days at school in a tabulated form “1 day per week for a year over 13 years equals 2½ years of lost schooling over that period”. The School F website also contained a document explaining a “community performance pact” agreement that included local businesses committing to support the ethos of the school, and to working in partnership with the school to dissuade students from being absent by agreeing to a “no service without an accompanying adult during school hours” policy for local stores. School F espoused to be at the centre of the local community and referred to a long history of providing an outstanding education to the children of the town.

The interview

Background
The Principal of School F was appointed in late 2011 and was in the position throughout the period of the study and through to early 2018. He was very clear about what he called the “heart of why”, describing that he wanted School F to be “an inviting school” and for kids to “want to come to school every day”. The Principal of School F referred to a process of wanting to create an incentive for parents and kids to “stick to and commit to education”, explaining that the school target of 90 per cent attendance was set because he felt that it was a lift from where they started (in the low 80’s), and “achievable with the resources that we had”.

The Principal had identified improving attendance as a key priority for the school in 2012. He
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explained his leadership philosophy on the use of data as being grounded in the belief that if a school leader was measuring staff performance against achievement data in subject areas, then he was “not going to hold someone to account for a kid who is not there” because “the best teacher in the world can’t teach a kid who isn’t here”. The messages shared by the Principal of School F indicated a deep commitment to equity and just practices.

Tracking and monitoring student attendance

The Principal of School F stated that the school attendance rate target was 90 per cent and he instigated a cycle of tracking attendance data every five weeks. This occurred in the form of students and parents receiving a “performance update letter” from the school detailing the student’s previous five-week attendance rate. He referred to the contents of the update as indicating the student’s attendance rate by percentage accompanied by a statement of being “on track” or “off track” for learning success. If the student was deemed to be “off track”, a series of points to support attendance improvement and an offer of support from the school was included in the update letter.

School F did not employ a dedicated Attendance Officer, rather the Principal allocated attendance duties such as data entry and collation of correspondence to teacher aides. The Deputy Principal chaired weekly assemblies and would share the data of each class in the respective primary sector and secondary sector assemblies to spotlight attendance rates for students. The Principal of School F shared that the five-week cycle process was in his view instrumental in the attendance rate improvement within the school. He described a five-week cycle as “really manageable” and as being like an “investment” that students and families could relate to. The Principal of School F was committed to giving students achievable targets and always leaving the door open for future improvement. He stated, “we reset the clock pretty regularly, every five weeks … if you didn’t achieve it this time, well, it’s achievable next time”.

The Principal of School F made no reference to the basic mechanics of roll marking, recording of student attendance nor following up on absence by class teachers. When queried on this, his response indicated a genuine expectation that this was the core business of teachers on a daily basis and that any discussion would be outside the realms of normal expectations. He repeatedly referred to the importance of the five-weekly cycle and how this had been central to the School F attendance improvement experience. A dedicated team to support the attendance improvement strategy was not mentioned throughout the interview, nor evident in the reviewed school literature. The Principal detailed that a “whole of community” approach had been enacted using the “Performance Pact” as the conduit between families and the school.
Engagement with community

The School F “Performance Pact” was a significant community engagement strategy initiated by the Principal. The pact was a whole of community philosophical understanding and agreement designed to support every child at the school to achieve to their “highest academic potential”. Within the pact, the school entered into an agreement with parents that if the parents supported the school by sending their child to school every day, and if they encouraged the values and learning behaviours their child would benefit from, then School F would deliver the learning progress for the student to achieve their potential. The community aspect of the pact included a commitment to support the school by encouraging attendance behaviours from students by not only prohibiting student custom in local stores during school hours, but also providing the school’s students with training and work opportunities and supporting the school with financial donations when required and appropriate. The school community (staff and parents) also committed to spending their money in the local businesses as a genuine strategy to build whole of community commitment towards the improvement of the town’s young people.

Students at School F had access to a range of educational pathways in senior secondary due to the commitment of local business in the “Performance Pact”. The Principal described how it was a critical goal of the school to ensure that every graduating student who wanted to stay in the town had access to meaningful employment within their community. Students who left town to pursue tertiary study “never came back”, so the Principal and local business leaders recognised the importance of working together to provide local pathways for those who did wish to stay. He described the alternative as “losing them all.” The Principal credited this whole-of-community approach with building community capital and goodwill among families, resulting in them supporting school efforts to improve attendance rates.

The Principal of School F explained a strong school relationship with the senior Indigenous Elder of the town, and how his team engaged her to mentor Indigenous students and support the school staff’s understanding of culturally appropriate behaviours and teaching methods. He shared how he believed that by being “intentionally inviting” he led a climate wherein Indigenous families felt welcome, and like they were in genuine partnership with the school. He referenced the school’s 24 per cent Indigenous student population as being an asset within a mindset of proactive growth, in that once a critical mass of families were supporting the school ethos, the positive effects on attitude towards engagement with the school flowed more freely.

Recognising and rewarding excellent student attendance

The Principal of School F was emphatic when discussing rewards for attendance that “we have
never used 100 per cent … I think it’s an unachievable threshold.” He went on to explain that staff are not expected to attain 100 per cent attendance and if the threshold is 100 per cent, then students will be punished for getting sick, which he viewed as natural and uncontrollable. The School F threshold for celebration and reward “was always about 90 per cent … relentlessly”.

Attendance attainment achievements by students, classes or cohorts were acknowledged at assemblies after the five-week cycle, highlighted in the school newsletter, and in the primary sector celebrated by earning the weekly COW (class of the week) award. Recognition of “on track” students in the form of having their significant attendance improvements or attainments promoted in local “Performance Pact” stores in the town’s main street had proven to be a popular reward. A further strategy within the reward system was titled “community cash”. In partnership with the “Performance Pact” local stores, students who attained attendance rate targets or demonstrated significant improvement would enter a draw to receive vouchers to spend in the town’s stores. The Principal explained the intent as being, students “get to take their parents to town … and everyone gets to be proud of them.”

The Principal of School E continually talked about “positive school culture” referring to how he and his team sought to “influence the environment”, be driven by a “moral purpose”, and help students achieve their “highest potential”. He stated “we are going to do whatever it takes” to achieve the goals set for the students at the school. The Principal referred to the “big picture” and the “end product” as being the most tangible reward for students because of high levels of attendance.

Other strategies
The Principal of School F reported no other significant strategies employed at the school to improve student attendance.

5.7 Data-based content themes answering the research question in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

The interview transcripts and school documents/publications, prior to the collation of the written summaries in Part B, provided the data with which to conduct a process of coding (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). Key practices (detailed in Table 21 below) that were evident across the Part B schools were collated to identify commonalities for analysis and coding.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

**Table 23 Key practices identified as common in Part B schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key practice</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
<th>School F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A positive environment linked to student motivation to attend</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A specific guarantee program or framework</td>
<td>Success for all students policy</td>
<td>Learning, performance, citizenship (LPC)</td>
<td>JET Planning</td>
<td>Right on Track</td>
<td>No specific program or framework</td>
<td>Performance Pact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targets (publicised and broadly owned)</td>
<td>95%, 10 days absent. 25-day challenge</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>92.5%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diligent tracking</td>
<td>Five-weekly</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Five-weekly, letter to each student, 15 minute roll marking message</td>
<td>Five-weekly</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Five-weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance team</td>
<td>Student support team</td>
<td>Support services team</td>
<td>The Head of Department team with responsibility for support services</td>
<td>Student services team</td>
<td>Support services team</td>
<td>No assigned team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted rewards</td>
<td>Big day out, Hawk points</td>
<td>Year level assemblies, rewards</td>
<td>Recognition on assemblies, no certificates or awards</td>
<td>Barbeque for being here</td>
<td>Postcards, celebration/reward days</td>
<td>Shop recognition, community cash, recognition at 90%, never 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance is priority in explicit improvement plan</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>Evident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The coded references that were identified through the conducted analysis process are listed in Table 22 below. They are aggregated into data-based content themes that were identified across the six Part B schools. The data-based content themes were then assigned to the levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Principals shared their perspectives on a range of matters within the semi-structured interview questions. For example, when a Principal referenced a specific celebration or rewards strategy, that reference was coded
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

within the theme of “targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets” and against the “microsystem” level. Not all data-based content themes were identically evident in each of the schools, nor were they necessarily implemented in similar fashion. Yet, across the six Part B schools, implementation of variations of these themes was evident.

Examples of the coding process are as follows:

*We have the attendance awards and morning tea* > Targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets > Microsystem

*One of the Deputy Principals leads case management* > A team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance > Mesosystem

*LPC is the way we explain what our school is about* > A specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership > Exosystem

Table 24 Identified attendance improvement references from Principal interviews coded against Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coded references from Principal interviews and documents</th>
<th>Data-based content theme</th>
<th>Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance celebrations and rewards</td>
<td>Targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets</td>
<td>Microsystem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;85% attendance target</td>
<td>Broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;90% attendance target</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;95% attendance target</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100% attendance target</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 days off school threshold</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-day attendance challenge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published data</td>
<td>A team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance</td>
<td>Mesosystem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial roll marking software</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support services team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-week tracking cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance data tracking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive school behaviour (PBL)</td>
<td>The creation and maintenance of a positive school environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-wide positive behaviour support (SWPBS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community engagement/partnerships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture/ethos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance habits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Improved student attendance       |
| Multiple curriculum pathways      |
| Academic performance             |
| Student learning success          |
| Improved learning outcomes        |
| Pedagogy improvement             |
| Pedagogical framework            |
| Moral purpose                    |

| Attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda |

| External partnerships             |
| Community partners               |
| Indigenous Elders                |
| Local community                  |
| School as centre of community    |

| A specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exosystem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Post-compulsory phase education |
| Attendance laws and central policies |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macrosystem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronosystem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Creswell (2014) cautions against the phenomenon of drift occurring as a researcher moves through the phases of a study. To prevent this shift in the meaning of codes, frequent comparison of the acquired data and the corresponding codes was conducted to ensure reliability of the findings from this analysis. A further process of inter-coding reliability (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020) was enacted by a second coder to ensure consistency of theme analysis, and to promote confidence that all themes from the data were accurately and appropriately identified. The themes that emerged from the coding analysis have been assigned to a level of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This assignation has been designed because one of the original assumptions applied at the start of this study is that schools and the processes within them that influence student attendance patterns are largely one of systems. These systems within schools can be what succeeds or fails when it comes to student attainment of desired attendance rates.

By applying Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to a new model of student attendance improvement, devised from research attained data-based content themes, it is envisaged that a supportive system can be provided to schools to enhance their
practice in this domain. It is acknowledged that it is problematic, even open to significant difference of interpretation, where each data-based content theme should be assigned within the levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The nature of the structure of the theory lends itself to ambiguous interpretation of where to assign data-based content themes within such a coding process. Soyer (2019) describes how the microsystem is nested within the mesosystem, emphasising the interrelated nature of the system levels. It is possible, for example, to assign the data-based content theme “the creation and maintenance of a positive school environment” to the microsystem or the mesosystem level. Teacher-student relationships contribute greatly to the achievement of a positive school environment in that the personal connection that a teacher makes with a student through deliberate, caring behaviours that, thus, contribute to a positive school environment could be assigned to the microsystem. It is also possible to argue that the collective efforts of teachers across a school community in creating a positive environment become a series of connected microsystems, and therefore part of the mesosystem level that contributes to the collective environment. If not all teachers, or a critical mass, are engaged in active behaviours that achieve a positive school environment, then an individual teacher would not be able to influence whole school data shifts as evidenced in the Part B schools. This described tension is argued to provide a compelling reason for the use of a theoretical framework that consists of nested structures. There is an in-built interdependency and required relationship that ensures that the levels work in unison, with an individual’s experiences moving between the levels. It is arguable that any of the data-based content themes could be assigned or could (perhaps even should be designed to) move in different contexts, with different people throughout all levels of the theoretical framework. Schools are imperfect environments, with infinite variables that impact upon student, teacher, and parent experience every day. With this approach in mind, an assignation of the data-based content theme against a theory level has been made with an acknowledgement that this is an imperfect science.

The data-based content themes that emerged from this process are listed (see Table 22 on p.137) and answer the research question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?” The data-based content themes below are not listed in hierarchical form according to importance or level of impact. No one strategy applied in isolation was proven to increase student attendance in a sustained way. It was evident from the evidence provided by the Part B Principals that a combination of strategies yielded attendance rate improvement:

- Targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets
- Broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

- A team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance
- The creation and maintenance of a positive school environment
- Attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda
- A specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership
- Attendance laws and central policies

All Part B participant schools have successfully attained excellent student attendance over consecutive years within complex and challenging communities. It was apparent from the interviews that the Principals and influential staff had traversed the levels of the different social systems that students engage with throughout their development. The cyclical and non-linear nature of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) can be applied to the practical and theoretical ways in which Part B schools approached the challenge of improving student attendance rates. The first six data-based content themes and their assigned Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) are discussed in relation to their application as a key practice that schools can enact to improve student attendance.

5.8 The Microsystem

The *microsystem* within Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the first level of the interrelated nests within the framework. The *microsystem* contains the closest interpersonal relationships, activities, and experiences a young person is exposed to and is the most influential level on a person’s development. It includes influence by family, close friends, teachers, and places where young people interact with others such as school and work. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) assertion that when young people’s *microsystems* align positively, then the development of children benefits because they adopt the same behavioural norms and values, is highly relevant to the realm of student attendance improvement.

The Principals of Part B schools detailed several ways in which they and their teams related to and made significant progress in educating individual students about their responsibilities and the benefits of excellent attendance, thus aligning their values and behavioural norms

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4 The data-based content theme “Attendance laws and central policies” is not a strategy that answers the research question as a “highly effective strategy that improves student attendance …” see 5.11 The Macrosystem
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Importantly, these deliberate and purposeful approaches appear to have infiltrated students’ individual view within their microsystem because the students at these schools changed their attendance habits and behaviours. Within the domain of students’ microsystems, Part B schools adopted “broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets”.

The first step that all Part B schools took in a purposeful fashion was to clearly declare to their communities that student attendance improvement was a key priority for their schools, and that key percentage or maximum days absent targets were to be attained by students, cohorts, and the school. This strategy also linked to a data-based content theme identified within the mesosystem level “attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda”.

All Part B school Principals articulated that they engaged in a process of ensuring that their community were aware of their “broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets” to enrol the community in an understanding of the importance of attendance at school, and how incremental absence added up to higher rates of non-attendance. The setting of attendance targets and thresholds with appropriate practices to achieve the targets is advocated to improve student attendance (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Mills et al., 2018). Part B schools utilised a range of methods to achieve this data-based content theme, including parent and community forums, newsletter messages, direct correspondence to families, orientation meetings, one-on-one meetings with students and their families, engagement of key community figures such as local Indigenous elders, and inclusion of attendance education in school literature. The Part B Principals all explained that to some degree they were confident that parent and community education on the importance of regular attendance had formed the backbone of their attendance improvement success.

The attendance targets set by Part B schools are detailed in Table 23 below. School A adopted a dual pathway approach for the target component of this data-based content theme, setting both a 95 per cent attendance target for students and the school, and broadly sharing a 10-days maximum absence target for all students. This approach gave students the opportunity to understand their responsibility to the school target (95 per cent), but also a clear method to attain the target, in that they needed to minimise their absence to under 10 school days. The 25-day challenge was a strategy implemented by School A that explicitly communicated an attendance target process for students. By challenging students to reset their focus and to aim to exceed their previous 25-day attendance rate, students were provided with clear direction and an achievable goal. School A attained the highest level of students above 95 per cent attendance for the study sample (52 per
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Table 25 Part B schools’ attendance rate target and intervention rate threshold

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part B school</th>
<th>Attendance rate target (%)</th>
<th>Intervention rate threshold (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>95 and maximum 10 days absence per year</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Schools that publicised a 95 per cent attendance rate target were School B (49 per cent of students above 95 per cent attendance) and School C (48 per cent of students above 95 per cent attendance). School D (45 per cent of students above 95 per cent attendance) broadly shared their attendance rate target of 92.5 per cent, School E (44 per cent of students above 95 per cent attendance) declared their target was 92 per cent, and School F (42 per cent of students above 95 per cent attendance) communicated a target of 90 per cent attendance. All school Principals indicated that individual student attendance below 85 per cent would trigger intervention and support. The approach from the Principal of School F was unique among the group. He was the clearest of the Principals in his commitment to the setting of a lower target that was achievable and manageable with the resources at his disposal. Interestingly, School F was also the only Part B school to exceed its attendance rate target when averaged across the three years of the study (90.2 per cent average attendance against a 90 per cent target).

The interviews conducted with the Principals of these schools and the review of their public literature demonstrated that they explicitly explained their belief in the direct link between high attendance rates and the students’ chances of achieving their preferred future. Doing so in the form of target setting successfully engaged students’ families and their peer groups to build a coalition of commitment to the universal goal of high attendance rates. Part B schools almost universally applied a systemic process of providing students with “targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets”.

Applying rewards to student attendance at school can be a contentious topic. Robinson et al., (2019) asserted that using rewards to celebrate student attendance can convey a negative, unintended message that in the long term may decrease attendance rates. They argue that an
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

undermining effect can occur and illustrate this in the finding of their study (Robinson et al., 2019) in which after the award period ended, lower attendance resulted. Challenging the use of rewards for attendance, Arthurs et al., (2014) refer to the practice as one in which schools resort to needing to “bribe a student” (p. 865). Indeed, some young people share this view as the Principal of School A recalled an interaction with students who questioned why rewards would follow excellent attendance as it was their obligation to attend school. Other educators believe that targeted rewards for the meeting of attendance targets can support creation and maintenance of a positive attendance culture. Five of the Part B Principals fall in this camp, with only the Principal of School C detailing very limited use of rewards for attendance target attainment. The use of targeted rewards for the “right problem and the right student population” is supported by Jordan (2019, p. 8). The microsystem of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the level in which young people and their views of the world are influenced by those closest to them. The Principals of the Part B schools (excluding School C) explained that their collective experience with targeted rewards was positive and played a key role in establishing a positive attitude towards attendance within their respective school cultures. The Principals believed that they were setting an example of fairness and equity to their students in providing reward for attainment of a goal/target. Without knowing it, the Part B Principals were operating as powerful influences within these students’ microsystem. The Part B schools provided similar weekly rewards in the form of assembly and newsletter recognition, and similar end-of-term food rewards for attendance target attainment whilst long-term reward events varied.

School A students worked towards qualification for the end-of-year “Big Day Out” or the senior years’ negotiated activity. In School B, students earned the right to attend the annual school ball event, and at School D the whole school or sector-focused “barbeque for being here” rewarded student attendance attainment. In School E, end-of-semester events changed with negotiation between students and staff. School F students were acknowledged not by a static event but within an ongoing system of recognition in their local community stores. The Principal of School C was the only Principal who articulated a culture of not providing targeted attendance rewards (aside from clapping attainment at assembly), detailing how their approach had been one of fostering attendance as a pathway to success more reliant on intrinsic motivation, rather than extrinsic reward. The strategy to build commitment to the school and local community and to care for the Indigenous student population of School C as a key asset of the school positively influenced students’ attendance choices. Given the high levels of student attendance attained at School C without a culture of tangible rewards, other strategies to be discussed in other levels of the theoretical framework appear to have influenced the attendance behaviour choices of School C students and families.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

The Principal of School F held strong views about not celebrating the attainment of 100 per cent attendance. He asserted that it was an unachievable target, and if attained was done so through good fortune, and that very few staff attended 100 per cent so why should students be expected to do so. This viewpoint was a clear statement of values and one that the Principal stated he shared broadly with the students and community of his school. The microsystem level is where students can learn and develop their values and beliefs that will guide their thinking and actions as they progress through life. This approach of the Principal of School F demonstrated a clear, values-based approach to his leadership and could form an interesting future study topic to research.

The outcome of the Part B schools’ approach to “set attendance targets” and “reward target attainment” has resulted in a positive influence on the behaviours/actions of students. A key measurement of influence on a student’s microsystem is to see if what they are doing or how, their behaviour has changed. Students and their peers who demonstrate changed behaviours have been positively influenced by those charged with that exact responsibility, “guiding and developing their values and beliefs as evidenced by their actions”. The two data-based content themes of “broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets” and “targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets” are included in a new student attendance improvement model (see Figure 12 on p. 156).

Two data-based content themes that could be assigned to the microsystem or mesosystem are “a team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance” and “the creation and maintenance of a positive school environment”. For this discussion, these data-based content themes have been assigned to the mesosystem level.

5.9 The Mesosystem

Connections and relationships between settings such as school/work and home are influential in the development of persons, and these change as people transition into new settings throughout the cycle of their life. Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) described these changes within level two of his theory, the “mesosystem”, which refers to relationships between the contexts of the microsystems. Leonard (2011) described the mesosystem as “lateral connections” (p. 990) and this description applies to the data-based content themes assigned to the mesosystem for this discussion. The application within School B schools of the data-based content themes: “a team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance; the creation and maintenance of a positive school environment; and attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda” will be discussed in this section.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

All schools in the Part B sample, except for School F, utilised a dedicated team to support student attendance improvement in their schools. A team approach to improving student attendance is supported by Kearney and Bates (2005), Mills et al., (2018) and Prabhuswamy (2018). School C assigned a team of staff to provide case management to their students under the umbrella of providing “support services”, but the Principal did not apply a specific name to the team. All schools, including School F, enacted “a team approach”, and this distinction between adopting a team approach, and whether the team is named, is important and will be returned to below. The interdisciplinary teams responsible for supporting student attendance improvement in each school were:

- School A - student support team
- School B and School E – support services team
- School C – the Head of Department team with responsibility for support services
- School D – student services team
- School F – no assigned team.

A key component of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the concept of culture. Leonard (2011) references culture as “reflecting the choices of the group” (p. 990) and it was evident that the Part B schools were seeking to and had experienced success in changing the cultural behaviours of their students. A team approach was central to this success.

Within each of the schools, along with the subtle difference in each team’s name (aside from School B and E with the same name), the staffing makeup of the team was not uniform. Most were made up of school leaders, teaching staff, and support staff (such as the Guidance Officer, Youth Support Coordinator, School-based Youth Health Nurse) and were similarly resemblance of each other, but they were not identical or formulaic. School F, for example, did not have a named team. The school had adopted a community wide approach to the challenge and the instigation of the “Performance Pact” was central to this strategy. It was evident that in every decision, and action undertaken in School F to improve student attendance, a team approach was in place, but the Principal did not see the need for a dedicated, named team.

Similarly, to School F, School C did not assign a name to its team that supported student attendance improvement. The Principal spoke at length about the importance of “culture” and her expectation that the staff worked in unison to solve the problems of attendance was explicitly clear. School C utilised the existing school resource in the Head of Department team to support student attendance improvement. Both School C and School F leveraged the power of the
influence within their wider communities (through work opportunities for students and activities that brought the school and community together) to support their students’ attitudes towards attending school. By doing so, they created important connections within their student’s *mesosystem*, and thus strengthened the home/school relationship which was manifested in higher levels of student attendance at the respective schools. The “whole of community team approach” was particularly effective with School’s C and F’s Indigenous student populations. The power of the peer group within individual student’s *mesosystems* was harnessed and yielded positive outcomes for those students and their respective attendance patterns.

A key factor in the successful implementation of a team approach at these schools was the interrelationship between the team’s existence, the tracking and monitoring activities that they undertook, and the previous data-based content themes from the *microsystem* level. Despite the different teams across the schools being comprised of different staff members, their efficacy was attained because of the discipline they brought to execution of the individual school’s attendance team culture strategy. The effect of this success positively influenced “*the creation and maintenance of a positive school environment*” in Part B schools.

The Principals of Part B schools understood the need to ensure that students wanted to attend school. School climate (Gottfried, 2013; Kearney et al., 2019a; Reid, 2015b) is a factor in students wanting to attend school. None of the interviewees expressed a punitive or reactionary attitude towards their own responsibility to provide an engaging, welcoming, and stimulating learning experience for students. Given the socio-economic status of the Part B schools (ICSEAs ranging between 64 and 111 points below the Australian average), the Principals actively encouraged and enacted strategies to ensure that their schools were positive learning environments for their students. Strategies employed by Part B schools such as before school “breakfast club” have proven to be successful to improve student attendance (Bartfeld et al., 2019). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) stress the importance of schools working in collaboration with all stakeholders in the student’s life when seeking to improve attendance. This fundamental was in evidence at Part B schools as the Principals had built community-based structures that brought the school and students’ home together, in essence the very definition of a successful *mesosystem*.

Strategies employed by the Part B schools to positively influence the relationship between students, their families, and the school (their *mesosystem*) included all schools providing explicit guidance on how they created and maintained a positive school environment for their students. In relation to attendance as a specific school improvement priority (the next data-based content theme within the *mesosystem* level to be discussed), all Part B schools had devised and publicised
to their communities a dedicated attendance policy. Not all schools had published the policy on their websites, yet all had socialised their respective policy within their communities. The school attendance policies contained consistent, yet individualised, messaging. The policies declared that school attendance was a priority, that it was important for student learning to be optimised, that the school had processes in place to monitor and respond to changing student attendance patterns, and student, school and parent/carer responsibilities for attendance were defined. It was clear from reading these policies and listening to the Principals that attendance improvement was serious business in the schools and students and their families were expected to be active participants in the process. This process of enrolling families in the attendance improvement journey of their students is an example of positive influence on the mesosystem.

Part B school Principals used a variety of language (coded references) to refer to their goal of creating a positive school environment for their students. The Principals spoke of “school values, school beliefs, school culture, and school ethos”. Each of the Principals exuded an unrelenting focus on doing all that they could to support the learning of their students, and they all believed that regular attendance patterns would support the achievement of this goal. The terminology (coded reference) of attendance as a “habit” or the changing of “habits” was frequently used by the Principals and is further evidence of their commitment to influence student behaviour and actions, resulting in a paradigm mesosystem shift for their school communities. This achievement shift is evidenced by the Part B schools’ high levels of student attendance.

“Attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda” is the third data-based content theme within the mesosystem level. As discussed within the explanation of Part B school’s attendance policy literature, an explicit understanding that improved student attendance was a priority of the schools was shared with each community. Each Principal referenced this priority within a discussion about their understanding of the links between regular attendance and improved learning outcomes (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2016a; Taylor, 2012). The premise of attendance equaling achievement was not the only driver behind the Principals’ commitment to high student attendance rates. Perry et al., (2019) reported that negative school experiences in the form of academic difficulty cause students to be absent from school. Part B school Principals discussed a range of strategies within their school improvement plans that were designed to provide appropriate levelled academic challenge for their students. The Principal of School C explained a range of multiple curriculum pathways and unique, student-centred timetabling options that enabled higher levels of student engagement. School D’s Principal detailed a rigorous approach to pedagogy improvement that he credited with supporting enhanced positive student perception.
of their learning experience and resultant attendance improvement. All of the Part B Principals discussed and shared examples of linking with their community partners and businesses to provide work experience, apprenticeship, and traineeship opportunities for their students. These offerings beyond the mainstream curriculum are supported as an appropriate strategy by Kearney and Bates (2005) who explain that “appropriate and tailored instruction” (p. 212) can be helpful in reducing student absence.

Part B school Principals led the implementation of actions within their communities that interconnected the *microsystems* of their school communities and, most importantly, their students to create a strong *mesosystem* supporting positive attendance behaviours. By enacting the data-based content themes of “a team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance; the creation and maintenance of a positive school environment; and attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda,” Part B Principals realised attendance rates higher than study sample and state averages.

5.10 The Exosystem

The third level of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the *exosystem*. Soyer (2019) refers to the *exosystem* as not being related to a person’s direct participation in the environment, but as being affected by the varied effects of the overall process. Multiple settings and events that do not necessarily involve the developing person as a direct and active participant can strongly influence their development. Examples include the decisions that key figures in a young person’s life make that they have no control over but do impact their experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In school settings this influence includes rules and procedures, changes to curriculum offerings, or the loss of opportunities due to changing economic conditions. Family financial situation changes, parental separation, and illness can be factors in children’s home lives that influence their development. A positive shift in community attitude towards student attendance, and observed action to support, was the goal of the Part B school Principals. To positively alter both the *mesosystems* in which the students exist but also the broader *exosystem* in which they live, and work is a complex challenge. Leonard (2011) refers to this effect, wherein a broader community effort achieves significant cultural change as a key achievement because many of the partners who have supported the change exist outside the daily environment of the school (in the *exosystem*). The data-based content theme of “a specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership” positively influenced student attendance rates at the Part B schools and will be discussed in this section. This data-based content theme aligns to previous research encouraging schools to embrace positive school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).
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The broader town or community *exosystems* were positively engaged to build community approaches to the attendance challenges that the Part B schools were facing. Developing partnerships with businesses and being explicit about the community benefits that ensued when schools and their communities collectively problem solved is in many ways the very essence of a positive development within one’s *exosystem*. The example of school A’s Principal and leadership team having impacted their city in an extremely positive way is a demonstration of this principle. Implementation of the whole community “success for all students” policy was credited by the Principal as being the driving force behind the high rates of student attendance attained by the school. The attendance data from School A is significantly above similar schools and schools from across Queensland, and it appears from the data and the stories shared by the Principal that a positive cultural change was achieved within the town as an *exosystem*.

The Principal and team at School B sought to create a strong sense of community and collective action towards a set of shared goals and values. The whole community LPC (learning, performance, citizenship) framework was an embedded cultural understanding of what the school was trying to achieve for its students. The achievement of community synergy in working together to support their children positively, influenced the community *exosystem* by challenging previous attitudes towards the importance of attendance and schooling and realising this change through evidenced altered behaviours. The Principal of School B explained that LPC enabled his team to embed multiple school improvement themes in one strategy. He referred to learning, attendance, behaviour, and school values as being incorporated into the LPC philosophy and goals.

School C implemented the process of “JET” (Junior Education and Training) planning to support students, parents, and community partners to support students’ educational pathways. The Principal of School C stated that the school was “the centre of community life.” By bringing the objectives and then behaviours of the whole community into alignment, the team at School C achieved a real cultural change in attitude towards school engagement, as evidenced by their attendance rates. Collective stakeholder input into attempts to improve student attendance is a method promoted by Heyne et al., (2020) and School C built this into their improvement model. Success in bringing the local Indigenous elder group with the school on their improvement journey is another strong example of School C positively impacting an external group (outside the school in the *exosystem*) with resultant benefits for their students.

“Right on Track” is the specific program implemented at School D. The program was introduced to ensure that all students in the school were “on track” for successful completion of school. The program was designed to bring students, parents, and school staff together at key junctures to
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discuss all aspects of the respective student’s progress through school. Processes of case management are advocated by Mills et al., (2018) to support students’ attendance improvement. The School D program was a proactive style of case management designed to prevent poor patterns of attendance or learning progress from appearing, rather than reactively seeking to redress them.

School E was the only Part B school without a named specific program embedded within the community. That is not to indicate that School E did not employ a range of strategies characteristic of this data-based content theme. A recommendation from this research is for School E to clearly define and synthesise its multiple community outreach strategies under one umbrella program. School E implemented a range of contextual strategies designed to accommodate the various groups within its community. This outreach positively influenced students’ experiences within this broader exosystem through programs such as the support for Muslim students, links with the local church, and partnerships with a university and an early childhood education provider. The whole of community culture focus that School E adopted had proven successful in adjusting family and student attendance behaviours.

The “Performance Pact” program was credited by the Principal as being the key driver behind the improvement in engagement and subsequent attendance rates at School F. The program reached right into the heart of the community, utilising community resources in several ways. Businesses supported the school with opportunities for students (work and training), with financial support (“community cash”), and with physical offerings of space for student achievements to be publicly acknowledged in local stores. This deep connection between the school and community created a positive exosystem of experience for School F students and their families to exist within. Robinson et al., (2018) emphasises the importance of targeting parental beliefs and values when seeking to change attendance behaviours, and the implementation of the “Performance Pact” program at School F meets this goal.

The successful implementation of the data-based content theme “a specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership” within the Part B schools (except explicitly in School E) supported the high attendance rates attained by these schools. Working in partnership to positively influence the behaviours and actions of key influences across their students’ community helped to create a positive exosystem experience for Part B school students.
5.11 The Macrosystem

The fourth level of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the 
*macrosystem* which involves the “overall societal culture in which individuals live” (Christensen, 2016, p. 23). Soyer’s (2019) description of the *macrosystem* as the one in which all the environments are together and that “environments within a culture are expected to be similar” (p. 78), reinforces the importance of the work of the Part B schools in building a positive culture within their communities. The *macrosystem* is concerned with the attitudes and ideologies that are formed within the broader cultural context of society. The three preceding levels of the system, in direct and indirect ways, affect the development of an individual whilst the *macrosystem* applies global, holistic influence. Indeed, the exact nature of the relationships between different influences on young people’s development remains largely undefined. Neal and Neal (2013) refer to the “elusive” (p. 723) nature of the precise relationships of systems to one another. This challenge in defining and being certain of one relationship and its influence on another reinforces the strength of a multi-faceted systems approach to the challenge of a complex problem such as student attendance.

The final data-based content theme, “*attendance laws and central policies*”, was the only theme that emerged within the *macrosystem* level of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It was referenced by Principals who almost unanimously discussed it in a negative way. They believed that the existing laws and policies that purported to apply punitive consequences to families of frequently absent students were ineffective and unhelpful to their proactive work. The Principal of School C referred to the compulsory schooling enactment procedures as “hopeless”, stating, “if you start, you go nowhere”. The Principal of School A was the only Principal who referenced the use of the compulsory schooling enforcement letter process in the interview and did not credit the processes with having any impact on the attendance improvement at the school, rather that he enforced them out of obligation to follow policy. The data-based content theme, “*attendance laws and central policies*”, is not included in the suggested student attendance improvement model (see Figure 12 on p. 156). It is suggested within the context of this work that school leaders apply the proactive measures described prior to consideration of any use of punitive measures.

Included in a new student attendance improvement model (see Figure 12 on p. 156) is a recommendation that school policy makers, leaders, and staff engage their communities in a process of building “positive school community partnership culture”. School leaders are well-versed and highly skilled at creating and maintaining positive school environments. The finding within this study of the data-based content theme of “*a specific program or framework is*
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*embedded in a positive culture of community partnership*” within the *exosystem* level being a core component of Part B school’s attendance strategy success can be instructive for colleagues. It is suggested from these findings that within a strategy to positively influence the broader *macrosystem* of schooling, the education sector, and societal values towards student attendance, the creation of a positive culture of community partnership should be a priority.

5.12 The Chronosystem

The fifth level of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, the *chronosystem* (Rosa & Tudge, 2013), was added after his introduction of the first four levels. The *chronosystem* “reflects changes in patterns of social interaction over time” (Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 732,) including transitions throughout a person’s development. As the *chronosystem* is concerned with changes over the course of one’s life, and the influence of environmental factors on one’s development, no data-based content theme has been applied to this level. A longitudinal study tracking the development of individual students from Part B schools, and how their experiences in these schools, their subsequent experiences throughout life and how these influences impacted their future life attitudes and behaviours towards school attendance (perhaps with their own children) could form a method to assess the *chronosystem* as a factor in their development. For the purposes of this study, that is to identify highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools, the *chronosystem* is a redundant facet of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

5.13 A new student attendance improvement model

In 2016 when this research study commenced, I used the *Track, Link, Celebrate (TLC)* - student attendance improvement model (see Figure 11 below) in my own practice as a Principal.
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**Figure 11 Track, Link, Celebrate (TLC) - student attendance improvement model (O’Connor, 2016)**

This model was based on my own experience as a Principal; it had no research evidentiary basis and had not been tried nor tested beyond my own school sites. I reflected on the qualities of this model in the process of using the research data-based content themes to devise a new model. The former model consisted of three main themes – to *track*, *link*, and *celebrate* attendance. Similarities with the data-based content themes from the research are evident in the *track* stage, in that the attainment of set targets and thresholds of percentage are referenced. An aspirational target of seeking to attain 60 per cent of students with attendance above 95 per cent appears optimistic in the extreme, in that so few schools attained this rate across the years of the study. Within the *link* stage of the model, reference to student learning programs, future success and responsibility is made, alongside the suggestion of linking student attendance to participation in non-essential school activities. Additionally, a *link* to support services for students and families required support is evident. The third stage of this model, *celebrate*, references celebration of attendance success at stated key junctures and for individuals, classes, cohorts, and the school. Upon reflection, it is workable and at least provided a framework within which to approach the challenge of improving student attendance.

My realisation, though, that it was likely to be manifestly inadequate to support the complex nature of the contexts of schools across Queensland, let alone further afield, partially led me to
commence this research study. In answering the research question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?”, alongside the findings and discussion, a product in the creation of a new student attendance improvement model is proposed. Assigning the data-based content themes to a level of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), taking this content, and creating a model based on the concept of a nested structure and interrelated relationships and systems, a new student attendance improvement model is provided in Figure 12 on p. 156.

The new student attendance improvement model is based on the concept of nested structures and interrelated systems that underpin Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Six data-based content themes that emerged from the research undertaken form the basis for the suggested strategies for schools to consider enacting to attain improved student attendance rates. These strategies are:

- Targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets
- Broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets
- A team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance
- The creation and maintenance of a positive school environment
- Attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda
- A specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership.

A seventh suggested strategy is “a positive school and community partnership culture”. This seventh strategy is the overarching cultural model that Part B schools achieved. The collective efforts of Part B schools within and alongside their community partners created a positive blurring of the lines between where the school stopped, and the community started. Kearney and Graczyk (2020) advocate for the need for “multifaceted ecological frameworks” (p. 316) to address school attendance challenges. This model seeks to provide a resource to support this goal. The statement within the model “the culture of the school and the community are one” is an aspirational guiding statement provided to inspire school leadership teams to strive to attain this outcome.

The four nested structures of the model with the respective suggested strategies reflect the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The visual representation of the strategies within this structure is designed to encourage school leaders and policy makers to view the challenge of improving student attendance from an interrelated systems perspective. Each strategy intersects
with the other, and implementation together and alongside one another will support attainment of attendance improvement goals. Implementing one strategy alone will not yield the sustained cultural change required to attain the long-term positive school and community culture that School B participant schools demonstrated. The language within the model is deliberate. Including terms such “broadly owned, co-create, positive school environment, team approach, positive culture of community partnership, student centred, whole of community, positive culture of community partnership, and interrelated systems” is purposefully designed to elicit approaches that reflect this language. It is hoped that the inclusion of positive language and the exclusion of negative language or references to punitive strategies will guide educators to pursue positive avenues of attendance improvement through partnership with a focus on relational solutions.

These strategies, and the model, are not presented as a panacea, nor guarantees for attendance improvement. Rather, they are presented within a coherent model based on the research findings of this study and presented in a digestible format that users can interpret and apply within their own contexts. Accompanying the diagrammatic representation of the seven suggested strategies are brief explanatory notes to guide implementation.
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Schools that attain high student attendance rates approach the challenge from an inter-related systems perspective. Schools with sustained high student attendance rates ...

- Invest in creating meaningful, student-centred partnerships with their broader community. The culture of the school and the community are one.

A positive school and community partnership culture (mesosystem)

- A specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership (exosystem)

- Implement a whole of community program or framework that brings the resources of the local community and the school together in partnership.

A team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance

- The creation and maintenance of a positive school environment
- Attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda (mesosystem)

Targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets

- Broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets (microsystem)

- Co-create, publish, and regularly reference the attendance targets for individuals, cohorts, and the school.
- Apply targeted reward systems and celebrations for the attainment of attendance targets.

Student attendance improvement model (O’Connor, 2021)
Chapter 6. Research conclusions

6.1 Research summary

The genesis of this research study lay in my professional observations and experience that student attendance improvement was a complex challenge and that little system-wide attainment improvement had been evident throughout my leadership career. To answer the research question “What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?” a two-part, sequential, mixed methods approach was utilised. To complement the findings and discussion of the quantitative and qualitative components of the study, the creation of a new student attendance improvement model, founded on the synthesis of the answers to the research question, has been proposed.

Part A of the study consisted of a population level analysis of student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools (n=208) across three consecutive years. The dependent variable selected for this process was the school percentage of students above 95 per cent attendance averaged across the years 2014-2016. Mapped through regression analysis against three independent variables of demographic data – the school ICSEA, the school Indigenous population, and the school population size, provided R² values to enable determination of the strength of correlation between the relationships. Sub-questions for Part A that formed the basis for analysis and discussion, and the sorting process for the selection of Part B participant schools, were:

1. Which Queensland state secondary schools recorded the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent average attendance over the years 2014-2016?
2. What is the geographic and demographic profile of the schools with the highest proportion of students with more than 95 per cent attendance?

The conducted regression analysis revealed weak relationships between student attendance averages above 95 per cent for the sample schools, and their ICSEA, Indigenous student population, and school population size. For ICSEA, the R² value was 0.3598; for Indigenous student population, the R² value was 0.2479; and for school population size, the R² value was 0.1248. The findings and analysis of Part A of the study led to the selection of six participant schools for Part B. The schools were in diverse locations in the state of Queensland, with diverse characteristics. Although five of the six schools were in rural locations; their population sizes, ICSEAs, proportion of Indigenous students, and their local community industry and characteristics were varied. The sixth school was in an urban, metropolitan, capital city. Part B of the study consisted of the collation of a series of case studies from the six selected schools that
identified highly effective strategies that had proved within the study to improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools. The Principals of the six Part B schools were interviewed, and publicly available school literature was reviewed. The interviews were semi-structured by design and the questions within the interviews were:

1. How do schools track and monitor student attendance within the immediate school setting (the student’s microsystem)?
2. What strategies do schools employ to engage with students’ families?
3. How do schools engage and collaborate with their community (the student’s mesosystem and exosystem) to improve student attendance?
4. How do schools recognise and reward excellent student attendance (building cultural values within the student’s macrosystem)?
5. What other strategies do schools employ to improve student attendance?

Discussion and analysis of the strategies provided by the Part B school Principals was conducted through the framework of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This uncovered a series of data-based content themes:

- Targeted rewards for attainment of attendance targets
- Broadly owned and publicised individual, cohort, and school attendance targets
- A team approach to tracking and monitoring attendance, and to improving attendance
- The creation and maintenance of a positive school environment
- Attendance improvement is an explicit priority within the school improvement agenda
- A specific program or framework is embedded in a positive culture of community partnership
- A positive school and community partnership culture.

The data-based content themes formed the foundation and subsequent creation of a proposed new model of student attendance improvement (see Figure 12 on p. 156) that is presented to support practice in this domain.

An observation from the synthesis of this research concurs with the report from the Office of the Auditor General Western Australia (2015) that found that isolated excellent attendance practices were evident in schools, but the strategies were not consistently implemented across schools and the state. In Queensland, the Mills et al., (2018) study recommended that common attendance
related terminology and definitions be devised, a comprehensive approach to attendance management be enacted, and that schools needed to make every day count (through excellent teaching and learning practices, and welcoming environments). Within this research study excellent practices, and the subsequent high attendance rates, were the product of individual school leadership drive, ingenuity, and perseverance. A systematic approach, supported by a centralised set of principles or model, to the enactment of highly effective strategies was not evident.

Previous research by Hallam and Rogers (2008) called for educators to raise the profile of attendance, enact monitoring patterns, create a positive school ethos, and consider applying rewards. Purdie and Buckley (2010) stressed the importance of schools viewing their learning environment as an integral part of the broader community, and to work at ensuring connectedness between the two. Ramberg et al., (2019) referred to development of a strong school ethos and the importance of placing an emphasis on academic success to ensure students perceive the school as a positive place for them to develop. Additionally, Young (2014) advocated designing attendance improvement strategies to be part of a school reform agenda that is promoted as an all-encompassing framework. The above stated themes in literature align to the data-based content themes of the new student attendance improvement model.

An aspect of practice that this research contributes is the provision of a new perspective in the notion that the problem of student attendance improvement be approached within an interrelated systems framework. Targeted improvement strategies should be employed in concert with other high yield strategies to support the goal of improving student attendance. The provision of a visual model (see Figure 12 on p. 156) to guide school practice has been provided to support the student attendance improvement journey in schools.

6.2 Implications for future practice

This research set out to investigate an aspect of school practice in Queensland and contribute some answers to a universal problem. The practices that can help schools and their communities arrest declining attendance are evident in the problem itself – the interrelated and systems-based nature of the challenge. Ensuring that students, families, communities, and schools work in unison to get students to school every day to be educated is a complex problem with no easy solution, but the strategies employed by schools and communities that have provided evidence (data) of sustained attendance improvement should be broadly shared with those who have not.

The research process and the findings of this study can be used by school leaders and policy
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makers to inform practice reform and support colleagues with attendance improvement processes. Deployment of the model as either a tool of professional learning, or a reflective tool to commence self-analysis of a school’s practices, are two ways in which the model can inform individual school or systemic improvement. Queensland Principals are a collegial group of professionals; many are actively engaged in professional associations, local cluster networks, and wider groups to grow their practice. A system-wide commitment to upskilling in student attendance improvement practices can be enhanced by the products of this study. The professionalism, optimism, and commitment of the Part B school Principals is to be acknowledged. It was noteworthy, and whilst impossible to quantify, I assert that their collective lack of reference to their school’s ICSEA, and their universal non-reference to any negative opinion of the capacity of their community and students, contributed to their attendance rate success. A positive disposition to the challenge and a deep, optimistic view that the school’s mission would be achieved were traits of all six Principals. The implication for recruitment and training of Principals deployed to schools with low attendance rates is clear; decision makers must recruit and provide appropriate training to any Principal and school leader as a given. Furthermore, personal disposition toward the challenge can be measured through profiling and personality assessment to ensure the right person is on the job.

One of the striking qualities of all Part B school Principals was the humanity that they brought to their role, and to the way they referenced their interactions with their students and communities. Negative language and punitive approaches to any aspect of the attendance challenge were few, and the genuine caring way they discussed their responsibilities was inspiring. This led me to reflect on the nature of Principalship as it relates to implementation of the new student attendance improvement model. As detailed, the model is designed to be interrelated and based on systems of community and partnership. As a matter of revision, education systems could embark on a process of reviewing their leadership cultures to ensure that the right priorities are foci for training and development.

Educators interested in Indigenous education may view the finding that there is a weak relationship between student attendance averages and Indigenous student population in the sample schools in this study of interest. A lack of productive Indigenous policy formulation developed in partnership with Indigenous peoples (Prout Quicke, and Biddle, 2017) has attempted to be addressed within the new student attendance improvement model. The interrelated nature of community as viewed through the lens of Indigenous peoples as described by Ehrich et al., (2010) requires strong connection between community and the school. Systems that intersect, nested within each other to forge strong partnership, can be achieved through co-creation of solutions,
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representation of Indigenous peoples in significant school/community positions, and the bringing of the local community and the school together as one.

ICSEA, postcode, or social status are regular reasons put forward in commentary for underachievement or attainment in schools from low ICSEA communities in Australia. This study spotlights six schools that have attained sustained attendance improvement whilst managing the challenges of complex communities. School C had an ICSEA of 889 (111 points below the national average) and attained a rate of 95 and above attendance for 48 per cent of its students. The specific learning that can be acquired from schools like School C is in the practices and strategies that emerged from the case study and became data-based content themes for the new student attendance improvement model. The moral lesson is also worth contemplating. It can be done. Schools can do things that others think are not possible or that often are consigned to the “too hard” basket. System learning from Schools A-F could provide impetus for much needed system reform and optimism.

The 100 per cent reward conundrum is a question that arose at junctures throughout the interviews. The Principal of School F did not reward students for 100 per cent attendance, concurring with the position of Arthurs et al., (2014), and Robinson et al., (2019) who oppose the practice. Other Part B schools did celebrate and reward 100 per cent attendance, or perfect attendance, and it is a practice I have employed myself in the past. I reflected deeply on the perspectives of the Principal of School F and the stated researchers who challenge the practice, and I have concluded that the practice is redundant. Without quantitative or qualitative evidence that it is a damaging practice, I have concluded that schools should deeply analyse the merits of a 100 per cent reward practice. A contrasting practice that could be an avenue for further research is to utilise a lower threshold (perhaps 96 or 97 per cent) as the “ceiling target” and trial whether this change in practice “pulls” the 93-95 per cent students closer to a higher rate. Another alternative could be to leave the target at 95 per cent and celebrate all students who attain this level of attendance. It is acknowledged that the issue attracts different perspectives, yet the words of the School F Principal that 100 per cent is “an unachievable threshold” ring in my ears.

A final implication for practice that I believe requires consideration in the domain of student attendance is a technical question emanating from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As an educator who regularly reflects on the practices and the skillset of my teams to deliver practices, I have formed the view that an analysis of the deployment and roles of key staff in schools could benefit student attendance improvement (and other school improvement priorities). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is
concerned with the influence on the development of young people from the various systems they encounter. Systems are made up of people, and schools are filled with systems and thus people. The reflective question that has arisen for me and that I think can be useful for school leaders is “What staff exist in schools within different levels of student’s relational systems and how might they be deployed to influence/act to support specific levels of student’s relational systems for attendance improvement?” Examples of this theory in action could be assessed during further research to identify which staff member is best positioned to influence students at the microsystem level? What types of actions would they need to employ to relate to students at their level of their development to infiltrate their values system and change their behaviours? Which staff member could influence the attitudes of families towards schooling and thus work indirectly within students’ mesosystems? Is there a staff member best positioned to liaise and influence the business community to positively alter the practices of the broader exosystem? In many schools, these relationship building tasks fall to the Principal or another school leader without thought as to whether this is the correct person with the appropriate skillset to achieve the aim. A focus on the aims and objectives of the task aligned to assignment of the responsibility could yield a paradigm shift in outcomes for schools. At present, the tasks are likely to be assigned within a hierarchical structure that may not be fit for purpose.

6.3 Professional reflections

As an experienced Principal who has led in settings where student attendance improvement is a constant priority, the complex nature of the issue is well known to me. It is a never-completed task, and one where guidance and support from colleagues is always a welcome addition to one’s suite of strategies. The innovative, resilient, and committed approach of the Part B Principals humbled me. I intend to honour their commitment to their communities and their generosity to this study by sharing their success and ideas widely. For my own practice, I can take the data-based content themes from the student attendance improvement model and implement them in my own College and share them across my network of colleagues.

The process of publishing a journal article (see Statement of Acknowledgement) as a requirement of course fulfillment was challenging, yet enormously rewarding. Synthesising part of a much larger study into a shorter, succinct, and meaningful article enabled me to finely hone my thinking around the broader study. The reception of feedback from the editors was humbling but ensured that I reviewed my writing in a more scholarly fashion, and ultimately, greatly improved the quality of the overall work. It is my hope that professionals find the article helpful as they navigate their student attendance improvement journeys.
6.4 Conclusion

This research study aimed to work through a systematic process to achieve the aim of attaining answers to the problem of improving student school attendance, which is fundamentally a problem of intersecting systems. Cascading from the quantitative phase to the qualitative phase and to the final phase of model construction, systems have played a part in each step of the way. It is hoped that school leaders use the findings from this research, and in particular the data-based content themes contained within the student attendance improvement model, to analyse their attendance improvement systems and the relationships within and between these systems.

Relationships form the heart of a positive school environment, but without systems to harness the power of these relationships maximum desired effect can be reduced, and student success chances can be compromised. All parents, teachers, and school leaders want the very best for their students, and we all want students to be at the heart of our decision-making and our everyday actions. When school leaders develop and nurture a system of relationships that create meaningful, student-centred partnerships with the broader community, the culture of the school and the community can become one.
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Reference List


Arthurs, N., Patterson, J., & Bentley, A. (2014). Achievement for students who are persistently absent: missing school, missing out? The Urban Review, 46, 860–876. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0307-4


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Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Human Services. (2014). *The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure.* Australian National Audit Office.


Egans, S.M. (2015). *Effective actions that improve high school attendance.* [Doctoral dissertation, University of La Verne]. [https://www.proquest.com/openview/734f1d27e170e67905926e24e8046ede/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750](https://www.proquest.com/openview/734f1d27e170e67905926e24e8046ede/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750)


What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?


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Appendices

Appendix A - Academic information sheet and participant consent form

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**PRINCIPAL INFORMATION SHEET**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project:</th>
<th>The Student Attendance Improvement study: What are the highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief Investigator:</td>
<td>Mike O’Connor: T (07) 3802 6222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim:</td>
<td>Examine the effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks:</td>
<td>Participate in a semi-structured interview to detail effective strategies that improve student attendance, share documents and artefacts of practice and provide feedback on creation of proposed model (s) of practice (approximately 2 hours)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration:</td>
<td>Approximately 2 hours during semester one, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Why is this research being conducted?**

The purpose of this research is to identify the state secondary schools in Queensland with the highest proportion of students with average attendance above 95% (Part A) and then capture the excellent practice that achieves this (Part B). During Part B creation of a model or models of practice will be undertaken.

**What will I need to do?**

You’ll meet with the chief investigator and participate in a two hour (approximate) semi-structured interview to share your strategies, documents and artefacts that detail practice that
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

results in excellent student attendance outcomes at your school.

**The basis by which participants will be selected or screened**
During Part A of this study, a population study will sort schools to determine those in Queensland with the highest proportion of students with average attendance above 95%. Schools meeting this criterion will be invited to participate in Part B.

**What are the benefits for me?**
As a result of participating in this project you will gain:

1. The opportunity to share your school’s excellent practice
2. An opportunity to contribute to a project creating a model or models of practice in the domain of student attendance improvement
3. The ability to access learning from other schools who demonstrate excellent practice in this domain
4. Access to all the materials and activities developed for this project

**Risks**
There are no significant risks to participants beyond those of everyday life.

**Confidentiality**
The contents of the conversations are confidential, your school will be de-identified, and any information will not be related to any other party, except through mutually agreed upon extracts that may be used in all publications/presentations. Participants may terminate their participation within this project at any time, including immediately before, during or after a conversation. At any stage participants can ask for a part or whole of the particular conversation to be deleted.

As required by Griffith University, all audio recordings will be erased after transcription. However, other research data (verbal interaction/debriefing session transcripts, survey responses, photographs, and analysis) will be retained in a locked cabinet and/or a password protected electronic file at Griffith University for a period of five years before being destroyed.

**The ethical conduct of this research**
Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National statement on ethical conduct in human research. Potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project should contact the manager, research ethics at 3735 4375
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Feedback to you
A one-page summary of key findings will be provided to all participants. Participants will also be made aware of any publications that are produced as a result of this project.

Privacy statement
The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of identified personal information. The information collected will be treated as confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, anonymity will be at all times safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at http://www.griffith.edu.au/privacy-plan or telephone (07) 3735 4375.

Questions/further information
Participants are free to discuss their participation in this research project with the Chief Investigator of the Research – Mike O’Connor. Any concern or questions should be directed to Mr O’Connor by the contact details given above. Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. If participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of this research project they should contact the Manager Research Ethics by e-mail research-ethics@griffith.edu.au or phone on 3735 4375.
You may complete this consent to register your consent for participation in this research study. I understand I will undertake the following activities if I choose to participate in this research project:

Tasks:
- Participate in a semi-structured interview to detail effective strategies that improve student attendance, share documents and artefacts of practice and provide feedback on creation of proposed model(s) of practice (approximately 2 hours)

Participant Expression of Consent for Interview

No, I do not agree to participate in a semi-structured interview. □

Yes, I do agree to participate in a semi-structured interview. Please read and sign below. □

I have read the Academic Information Sheet for the Student Attendance Improvement study and agree to take part in the interview in semester one, 2018. I give my permission for the research project team to contact me via the details I provide, at a nominated time.

I understand that the conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of information relating to school practices in the domain of student attendance improvement. I also recognise that the information collected is confidential, will be de-identified and will not be disclosed to third parties without the consent of the school and the participants except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, parents’, students’ and teachers’ anonymity will be safeguarded at all times.

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the general aim of the Student Attendance Improvement study, and, in particular
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

☐ I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me, my child, or the school from participating in this interview
☐ I understand that my participation in this interview is voluntary
☐ I understand that the data collected in this research will not be used by the school and school staff for assessment purposes
☐ I understand that parents’, students’, and teachers’ identities are always protected
☐ I understand that if I have any questions I can contact the Chief Investigator, Mike O’Connor, 07 3802 622 or email, mike.oconnor@griffithuni.edu.au
☐ I understand I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Griffith University at 07 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au

☐ I understand I am free to withdraw from this study at any time
☐ I give my permission to participate in this interview.

I,________________________, have read and understood the information. I hereby consent for the project to be conducted as stated in this information sheet.

________________________ ______________________
(signature) (date)
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Appendix B - Part B semi-structured interview question schedule

The sub-questions for Part B:

1. How do schools track and monitor student attendance within the immediate school setting (the student’s **microsystem**)?
2. What strategies do schools employ to engage with students’ families?
3. How do schools engage and collaborate with their community (the student’s **mesosystem** and **exosystem**) to improve student attendance?
4. How do schools recognise and reward excellent student attendance (building cultural values within the student’s **macrosystem**)?
5. What other strategies do schools employ to improve student attendance?
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Appendix C - Full ethics approval from Griffith University

-------- Forwarded message --------
From: <rims@griffith.edu.au>
Date: 29 March 2017 at 09:57
Subject: Full Research Ethics Clearance 2017/188
To: h.kanasa@griffith.edu.au, d.geelan@griffith.edu.au
Cc: research-ethics@griffith.edu.au, k.madison@griffith.edu.au

GRiffith University Human RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW

Dear APo David Geelan

I write further to the additional information provided in relation to the provisional approval granted to your application for ethical clearance for your project “What are the highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?” (GU Ref No: 2017/188).

This is to confirm that this response has addressed the comments and concerns of the HREC.

https://mail.google.com/mail/?ui=2&ik=ba7f54722a&view=pt&search=inbox&th=15... 27/04/2017

The ethics reviewers resolved to grant your application a clearance status of “Fully Approved”.

Consequently, you are authorised to immediately commence this research on this basis.

Regards

Kim Madison | Human Research Ethics

Office for Research
Griffith University | Nathan | QLD 4111 | Level 0, Bray Centre (N54)
T +61 7 373 59043 | email k.madison@griffith.edu.au
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Appendix D - Department of Education and Training research approval

5 May 2017

Mr Mike O'Connor
Griffith University
PO Box 257
COORPAROO QLD 4151

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your application seeking approval to conduct research in Queensland state schools titled "What are the highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland State Secondary Schools?" I wish to advise that your application to invite research participants to be involved in your study has been approved. This letter gives you approval to approach potential research participants only.

You may approach principals of the schools nominated in your application and invite them to participate in your research project. In the first instance, please provide principals of these schools with the attached letter which provides important information to help inform their decision about whether they wish to participate in this study. Your approval is conditional upon provision of this letter to each of the school principals you have nominated (you may need to photocopy the attached letter to provide sufficient copies for all principals).

As detailed in the Department's research guidelines the following applies to the study:

- You need to obtain consent from the relevant principals before your research project can commence.
- Principals have the right to decline participation if they consider that the research will cause undue disruption to educational programs in their schools.
- Principals have the right to monitor any research activities conducted in their facilities and can withdraw their support at any time.

This approval has been granted on the basis of the information you have provided in your research proposal and is subject to the conditions detailed below.

- Approval from the Regional Directors must be sought on the schools selected for the research project. The list of schools is to be provided to Research Services to action this condition.
- Any changes required by your institution's ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Training for consideration before you proceed. Conversely, any changes required by the Department must be submitted to your...
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

institution's ethics committee to ensure you are not in breach of your ethics approval.

• Any variations to the research proposal as originally submitted, including changes to the research team, changes to data collection, additional research undertaken with the data, or publication based on the data beyond what is normally associated with academic studies, should be submitted to the research officer via email. Significant variations will require the submission of a new application.

• Papers and articles intended for publication that are based on data collected from Queensland state schools and/or Departmental sites should be provided to the Department for comment before release.

• Under no circumstances should any publications disclose the names of individuals or schools.

• You are required to contact the Department if you are contacted by the media about research activities conducted on Departmental sites or if you intend to issue a media release about the study.

• At the conclusion of your study you are required to provide this Office and principals of participating schools with a summary of your research results and any associated published papers or materials in hard copy. You are also requested to submit the documents in electronic format, or provide a link to an online location if possible, to research.stratpol@det.qld.gov.au. Failure to provide a report on your research will preclude you from undertaking any future research in Queensland state schools.

Please note that this letter constitutes approval to invite principals and teachers to participate in the research project as outlined in your research application. This approval does not constitute ethics approval or support for the general and commercial use of an intervention or curriculum program, software program or other enterprise that you may be evaluating as part of your research.

Research Services values your input into the research application process and is seeking your responses through the enclosed short feedback form. It is hoped that this feedback will enable Research Services to effectively assess whether its processes are efficiently streamlined, transparent and mutually beneficial to all stakeholders.

Should you require further information on the research application process, please feel free to contact Tanya Murray, Senior Research Officer, Strategic Policy and Intergovernmental Relations on (07) 3034 5945. Please quote the file number 550/27/1857 in future correspondence.

I wish your study every success.

Yours sincerely

Dr Angela Ferguson
Director
Research Services
Strategic Policy and Intergovernmental Relations
What are highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland state secondary schools?

Appendix E - Department of Education and Training approval for Principal participation

5 May 2017

Dear Colleague,

Mr Mike O'Connor of Griffith University has the Department’s approval to approach your school inviting participation in the research project titled "What are the highly effective strategies that improve student attendance in Queensland State Secondary Schools?"

The acceptance of the invitation to participate is entirely voluntary and at your discretion.

This letter provides you with information about the Department’s terms and conditions for research conducted on state school sites to inform your decision as to whether or not your school will participate in this research. The Department supports this conduct of quality research in State schools and values the potential contribution of good research in informing educational policy and professional practice. Participation in research, however, may impact on the daily operations of schools, and it is therefore imperative that discretion is used when deciding whether to agree to research involving your school.

As a minimum, the researcher should provide you with the following documentation to inform your decision regarding school research participation:

- an information statement which describes the research, identifies who will be involved (e.g., students, teachers, parents/caregivers) and explains what will be required of these participants;
- the informed consent form for you to sign to indicate your agreement that school staff, students and/or parents/caregivers can be invited to participate in the research;
- a copy of the approval to approach letter from central office or a regional office (where applicable);
- a copy of the final ethical clearance from their institution’s Human Research Ethics Committee;
- full copies of any data collection instruments such as surveys, questionnaires, and interview schedules to be used in the study;
- a copy of all current Blue Cards and/or exemption notices from Blue Card Services at www.bluecard.qld.gov.au for any researcher(s) seeking access to children or school sites.
Most importantly, participation in any research is voluntary, and you have the right to decline your school's participation in a research project, even if approval to approach your school has been granted at central office or regional level. It is also recommended that you monitor any research activities conducted in your school and you may, if you wish, withdraw your support for the research study at any time without penalty.

At the conclusion of research involving your school, the researchers are required to provide you and participants with a written report summarising the main findings of the study.

Should you require further information on the research application process, please feel free to contact Tanya Murray, Senior Research Officer, Strategic Policy and Intergovernmental Relations on (07) 3034 5945. Please quote the file number 550/27/1857 in future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Dr Angela Ferguson
Director
Research Services
Strategic Policy and Intergovernmental Relations