

# LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL BUDGET AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

Plaza Room

Monday 30 July 2007 at 10.35

**[OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT]**  
BY AUTHORITY OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

## MEMBERS:

Hon. R.I. Lucas MLC (Chairperson)  
Hon. D.G.E. Hood MLC  
Hon. C.V. Schaefer MLC  
Hon. R.P. Wortley MLC

## WITNESSES:

**CHRIS ROBINSON, Chief Executive,**  
**GINO DeGENNARO, Deputy Executive Director, Resources,**  
**RENE BOS, Director, Financial Management Services, and**  
**JAN ANDREWS, Deputy Chief Executive, Schools and Children's Services,**  
all from the

**Department of Education and Children's Services, Education Building, 31  
Flinders Street,  
Adelaide 5000,**

**called and examined:**

~~~~~*EXTRACT*~~~~~

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176 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: I have a number of questions about programs and things, more than about financial questions, if that is okay. In fact, I suspect that you would probably welcome that. The first one is in respect to school truancy levels. There have been some alarming statistics of late, and I think it is a problem across the country, not just in South Australia. According to some federal government papers, on any given day, 38 per cent of Australian children are absent from their classrooms without explanation. What programs does the department have in place to specifically address that issue across government schools?

MR ROBINSON: There is certainly not 38 per cent unexplained absences in South Australia and schools—let me just correct the record.

177 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: What is it for South Australian schools?

MR ROBINSON: There is 91 per cent attendance of all students for every day they are supposed to be at school across the state. That figure has remained remarkably consistent over the last few years.

178 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: Can I just explain? I meant that, of the absentees—which is approximately 9 per cent, so that is in line with what you were saying—38 per cent of the 9 per cent is unexplained.

MR ROBINSON: Another seven percentage points are explained absences, and that brings it up to a figure of about 97 per cent, I think, and there is just 2 or 3 per cent unexplained absences. That can occur more frequently in different schools. We tend to see it in schools in lower socioeconomic areas, and in some small indigenous schools there are more unexplained absences than in some of the other schools around the state. Overall, there is a very high rate of attendance. That is the first point to make. We have had an absentee task force in the state since 2002, which has a number of different representatives on it: some parents and Principals Association people, departmental officers and South Australia Police, the Australian Education Union is also involved, and we have also had input from some noted academics who work in this area. I think we have a world-leading approach to this, where all schools are required to implement an attendance improvement plan. Even though overall rates are not high, there are pockets of real concern. There are some serial offenders, if you like, who do not attend school regularly and who have a lot of issues dealing with things outside the school boundary, if you know what I mean. We try to get a plan in place in schools where those students are given extra attention, and we try to implement measures with their parents around how we can improve their attendance.

179 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: So, if a child is absent on a given day, what does the government schools policy trigger?

MR ROBINSON: The schools will contact parents, and there will be follow-up discussions.

180 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: Is that mandatory?

MS ANDREWS: It is mandatory if the child is not present for more than one day—for three days—obviously, if the child is home sick and sends a note the following day. Usually, we have a practice with schools where we encourage the parents and community to tell us if something is going on and the child cannot be there.

181 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: I raised the question because, in some research done by my office, there does seem to be quite varying policy responses in various schools. I am not criticising that: I am just saying that that is our observation, and that is quite different in other states. There seems to be a consensus across government schools in other states in their approach to a child being absent.

MR ROBINSON: Some schools have purchased access to a commercially provided SMS text messaging service to contact parents if the child is absent. We have not made that mandatory, because in different situations people will have different ways of contacting parents. It may not be an effective strategy in a remote school on the Lands in the way it might be in a busy, large suburban school. We have mandated that

they have an action plan which includes all the arrangements around contacting parents and following up to try to get an individual solution to each issue. With all that work, schools will still have some very small numbers of perennial absentee students where work with their parents is not leading to a change in that behaviour; there are very small numbers who are really difficult to deal with. However, I think we have a very extensive and comprehensive approach, with schools really going into quite detailed planning, work and effort in this area, and I believe it has led to an improvement. Between 91 or 92 per cent come all the time, and the split between the unexplained and the explained absence has improved by doing that follow up work.

182 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: My second question is with respect to something you mentioned earlier, which I think the committee would be aware of anyway. The new SACE program is imminent and, as I understand it, one of the significant changes under that program is that the external assessment percentage of the total year 12 SACE program will reduce to 30 per cent as opposed to the current external assessment level which, I believe, is 50 per cent—for most subjects, anyway. Could you explain the rationale behind that change?

It is a significant one. For example, when I was in year 12 (and I don't think it was that long ago) it was 75 per cent, so we have seen a very rapid change in what is, essentially, the predominance of external assessment. Could you comment on that?

MR ROBINSON: To be honest, I am not sure of the detail of that; I am not sure if that is true. The new SACE will, I think, increase standards of requirements; not be based on just completing year 12 but actually making sure that people get to an appropriate standard with their literacy skills and so forth. I am not sure about the extent of external assessment.

183 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: The government literature is quoting a figure of 30 per cent at the current time.

MR ROBINSON: Can I come back to you with a fuller answer on that particular issue?

184 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: I have a few quick questions. Something that has always intrigued me is how we determine whether a teacher is a good teacher or not. What performance indicators do we have around individual teachers to determine their level of performance?

MR ROBINSON: It is a very good question, but it is not as straightforward as it sounds. As you know, there has been a lot of discussion about performance pay for teachers and the sort of criteria that might be used to objectively evaluate teacher performance. I think that people who work closely with teachers recognise, at a local level, who are really good teachers and who are not; however, to get system-wide response that is objective and unequivocal is very complex. In some ways, it probably cannot really be done because the outcomes achieved in any given school or class setting depends so much on the situation of that school. As you know, retention and literacy rates as well as school performance rates, if you like, vary a lot between different communities. We have much higher retention in the better-off, urban settings than we do in many rural or outer suburban areas where a lot of low socioeconomic

status families live, so objectively determining what constitutes a better outcome or a better performance at a school level, let alone then attributing that to teacher level across the board, is a really complex business.

The OECD is doing some work at the moment on looking at measuring performance by a value-added concept. So, you do a lot of work in allowing for what you start with, where the levels were at a particular point in time, and then measuring the improvement over time as the main vehicle. Internationally, I think this work is in its infancy stage, but we are interested in this sort of notion, because I think it will be important for better and more precisely measuring both school performance and teacher performance in the future.

The other thing we do is that we have an advanced skills teacher category in our teaching structure, where people can come forward, really on a voluntary basis. If they want to apply for a higher grade of teaching based on their innovation and excellence in teaching over the years, they come forward with a portfolio of evidence, it gets assessed by a peer panel of professionals and at the end of the day people are, if you like, granted this higher level of teaching status of being almost like super teachers, based on a comprehensive assessment of their teaching performance in their individual case. It can take into account a whole lot of different factors and, in fact, if you like, the assessment will be a bit different in each case because of the different background and teaching career that different teachers have had.

I think it is very difficult to measure performance in an intricate professional area like teacher education, compared to professions where you can easily measure the output of people, such as, you know, sales people. Individual performance is much easier to measure where there's an unequivocal measurement of it and a whole lot of different people's professional input is not relied on to get a set of outcomes.

185 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: Are there any performance measures in place for teachers?

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MS ANDREWS: Yes, there are. The school principal is charged with the responsibility to monitor teachers' performance.

186 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: How does he or she do that?

MS ANDREWS: They do it in a variety of ways. They do it in the walk-around method, I guess; they listen to parents, they watch what's happening with the kids' results in class and they form their own views from teacher and other colleague comments. What I am trying to get to is that, if they find that there is a problem, the teacher is put on notice and then they work with a panel of professionals over a period of time until their problem behaviour goes away. Sometimes you can have teachers who just simply meet situations that they can't deal with. They need some extra support and some extra training, and they work it through. They are essentially monitored for a couple of years and if that problem goes away then they are fine. If, after the initial period of monitoring, which is less than two years, it doesn't go away, that attention is intensified and they are put on a much more formal process of retraining, measurement, observation and follow-up.

187 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: What's the trigger that initiates that process?

MS ANDREWS: It could be a range of things. It could be a set of parental complaints about a particular teacher, or children's complaints. It could be collegial reactions or the principal's own observation, or the school results in some way.

188 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: I guess the difficulty is that—if I take out the words 'good' and 'bad', let's say 'weaker' and 'stronger', it may be an experience-related function perhaps—on any bell curve, those on the weaker end are difficult to target, because it's very difficult to have objective measurements in place in order to determine exactly who they are. Is that a fair statement?

MS ANDREWS: It's not what we find. We find that the local knowledge is pretty strong as a set of judgments about what makes for a good or bad teacher, or weaker or stronger teacher. Then when they enter into the process of observation there are particular standards that are looked at in terms of people's pedagogy, or their classroom or children management, or their attention in a sequential and ordered way to managing the children through the curriculum—that kind of thing.

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220 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: Does the department have a policy with respect to students having mobile phones at school?

MR ROBINSON: Each school has its own policy. We want to restrict students having access to or using their mobile phones within classes. This is a matter of some consternation in schools because many students are very used to connecting with their peers through the use of SMS technology and the use of mobile phones within school is an ongoing battle between teachers and students. Schools have a policy and the governing councils are involved in developing the policies and some include leaving your phone at the door.

221 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: School by school is what you are saying?

MR ROBINSON: Yes. Every school has an approach, at least at the secondary level.

222 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: What about with respect to teachers having mobile phones at school during class time?

MR ROBINSON: Generally speaking teachers would not have their phone turned on while in class, but it is a local management issue for school principals and their staff.

223 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: In 2003 the SHine SA sex education program was introduced called SHARE, and I understand that it is now called RASH, which is interesting. One of the stated aims in its brochure was that it was necessary in order to raise student awareness of sexually transmitted diseases and to reduce the rates of chlamydia. At that time 441 South Australian school-aged teenagers were reported cases of chlamydia in the year the program was introduced. In 2004 it was 581, in 2005 it was 588 and in 2006 the number was 747 cases. The program has been running for some four years now. That seems that the program has failed. Can you comment?

MS ANDREWS: The program is not compulsory in government schools but is arranged through the decision of the governing council in schools. It is not in operation in all schools, so you could not expect it to cover all cases of sexually transmitted disease occurring within school sites.

224 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: Nonetheless, the numbers have increased substantially. It is in 40 per cent of government schools—about half. I am interested in your comments on the numbers.

MS ANDREWS: Being in 40 per cent of schools you could not relate to the cases of chlamydia you are citing in a statistically reliable way.

225 THE HON. D.G.E. HOOD: You see no link?

MS ANDREWS: Not without further evidence on the effect on schools in which it has been implemented as opposed to the ones that it has not. I point out the disparity between the numbers of schools the SHine program has been selected by the school community to take place. I suggest there are other factors than education programs alone at work in young people's sexual and other behaviours.