

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

WRITTEN QUESTION

Mrs Finocchiaro to the Minister for Education:

Attendance and Truancy

- 1. How many Regional Attendance and Truancy Officers, Remote School Attendance Officers, and Senior Attendance and Truancy Officers there are currently in the Northern Territory, and where they are located?**

With a view to improving operational effectiveness, the Department of Education adapted its approach to enforcement of Part 4 of the *Education Act 2015* so that from 2017 there has been a greater focus on engaging and supporting families prior to punitive measures being applied.

This change coincided with the direction of Commonwealth Government attendance programs, which saw the expansion of the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) and the cessation of the welfare quarantining measure the School Engagement and Attendance Measure (SEAM).

Further, the department launched its new strategic plan for 2018 - 2022 which included a greater focus on working with partners to support engagement, as opposed to compliance focused measures. This included an organisational realignment where Attendance and Truancy Officers were transitioned to either Engagement Officers (EOs) and Compliance Officers (COs). This change allowed for the delineation of Attendance and Truancy Officer duties, so that EOs could focus on engagement and support for families and COs could still provide a point of punitive intervention following failed re-engagement attempts.

The department employs 22 EOs across all regions in the NT who, on referral from the schools, work directly with students and families to improve attendance at school. In Term 4, 2019, EOs worked with schools, families and students in approximately 32 remote and 16 urban Northern Territory (NT) Government schools. EOs worked with a similar cohort of schools in Term 1, 2020.

The department employs eight COs across all regions in the NT, with frequent travel to remote and very remote communities. COs compel enrolment or attendance at school through the issuing of directions and notices.

In Term 4, 2019, COs targeted schools with the highest number of disengaged students who have not attended school in the previous 20 days. COs continued this approach in Term 1, 2020. COs also conduct regular patrols of major shopping centres in urban and regional locations during school hours. In 2019, COs issued 412 information notices and 35 infringement notices.

In 2019, EOs and COs provided direct support and intervention with over 900 families throughout the NT. Officers engaged with a further 1669 students and their parents through engagement patrols in major centres throughout the NT.

While the RSAS program operates in 38 communities, the department is funded by the Commonwealth Government to provide RSAS staff in ten communities. These staff work with schools and the communities to improve school attendance

The number of staff and locations are shown in the table below:

Location	Engagement Officers	Compliance Officers	RSAS staff
Alice Springs	5	2	-
Tennant Creek	2	1	-
Katherine	3	2	-
Darwin	6	1	-
Palmerston	2	1	-
Tiwi Islands	1	-	-
Groote Eylandt	1	-	-
Nhulunbuy	2	1	-
Gunbalanya	-	-	3
Barunga, Wugularr, Bulman, Jilkmingann	-	-	11
Ngukurr	-	-	8
Borroloola	-	-	8
Lajamanu	-	-	4
Mutitjulu	-	-	4
Numbulwar	-	-	9
TOTAL	22	8	47

2. How many compulsory conference notices have been issued by Attendance and Truancy Officers in the past year, by location?

As referred in the response to Question 1, there were no compulsory conference notices issued in 2019 due to the change in strategy to improve engagement. However, EOs and COs provided direct support and intervention with over 900 families throughout the NT.

3. How many compulsory conferences were attended by parents/carers in the past year by location?

As referred in the response to questions 1 and 2, there were no compulsory conferences attended by parents/carers in 2019 due to the change to the strategy to improve attendance. Compelling families to attend with the threat of punitive actions in the first instance saw parents not actively engage and avoid officers. These measures were replaced with a new process utilising information notices and direct meetings with families.

4. How many attendance plans were issued by Attendance and Truancy Officers in the past year by location?

As referred to in previous response, there has been a change to the approach to improve attendance. One of these changes saw the cessation of the development of separate attendance plans. Instead, officers work directly with the schools utilising and augmenting existing school-generated individual student plans to support re-engagement. During 2019, officers worked with students, families and schools to reengage over 412 students who had been chronically disengaged from education.

5. How many compliance notices were issued to parents/carers in the past year, by location?

As referred to in previous responses, there were no compliance notices issued in 2019 due to the change to the strategy to improve attendance.

6. How many infringement notices were issued to parents/carers in the past year, by location?

There were a number of parents who failed to comply with information notices issued were subsequently issued an infringement notice.

The summary of infringement notices issued is shown in the below table:

Region	Infringements issued in 2019
Alice Springs	1
Barkly	-
Katherine	5
Darwin/Palmerston	8
Arnhem	21
TOTAL	35

7. How many parents/carers were prosecuted for their child's non-attendance under Section 40 of the *Education Act 2015* in the past year for a first offence, by location?

Further to previous responses, one of the operational improvements identified during the change in strategy was the suspension of prosecution of families for continued non-attendance. This decision was due to limited impact on the attendance of student's concerned. The department instead works more closely with NT Police Fire and Emergency Services and Territory Families to connect work across agencies with the same families. The department will still utilise prosecution as a compliance tool, should it be required.

8. How many parents/carers were prosecuted for their child's non-attendance under Section 40 of the *Education Act 2015* in the past year for a second or subsequent offence, by location?

Question 7 refers.

9. Which Northern Territory schools are currently located in a School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) area?

The Commonwealth Government ceased the SEAM program effective from 31 December 2017. This followed a study conducted by the National Indigenous Australian Agency (formerly the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet) on SEAM, including implementation in the NT through a randomised controlled trial.

This study has found that, although the SEAM intervention was being implemented roughly according to expectations, there were no statistically significant differences in attendance before and after SEAM intervention for students in the seven NT schools included in this study.

This study can be accessed online (<https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/school-enrolment-and-attendance-measure-randomized-controlled-trial-full-report>).

SEAM processes were based on the department's enforcement of Part 4 of the *Education Act 2015*. The only difference for students and families was that for SEAM sites/clients the punitive measure was welfare suspension, as opposed to an infringement notice.

This study prompted the department's consideration of all its enforcement processes which resulted in the operational improvements highlighted in the response to Question 1.