Non-Attendance and Student Background Factors

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Regular attendance is often seen as an important factor in school success. Students who are chronic non-attenders receive fewer hours of instruction; they often leave education early and are more likely to become long term unemployed, homeless, caught in the poverty trap, dependent on welfare, and involved in the justice system. High rates of student absenteeism are believed to affect regular attenders as well, because teachers must accommodate non-attenders in the same class. It has been suggested that chronic absenteeism is not a cause of academic failure and departure from formal education, but rather one of many symptoms of alienation from school. Chronic absenteeism, truancy and academic failure may be evidence of a dysfunctional relationship between student and school, suggesting that schools need to be more student-centred and supportive of students with different needs. This argument is supported by research that highlights significant associations between student background factors, poor attendance, and early school leaving.

While discussions about causes of student absenteeism and relationships between absenteeism and achievement continue, there is little information about what level of absenteeism identifies a student who is at risk or what level is acceptable. In the United States, attendance rates for schools in many states are reported annually. An attendance rate of 93 percent appears to be average. Attendance rates in Nevada school districts range from 91.8 percent to 94.7 percent, with most districts in the 92-94 percent range. Under proposed standards for determining school and district under-performance in Massachusetts, three-year average attendance rates below 93.2 percent for elementary schools, 91.4 percent for middle schools, and 87.7 percent for high schools are below state standards and place the school on notice. For the 1997-98 school year, Minnesota reported a state attendance rate of 93.3 percent.

Few studies have attempted to quantify absence or attendance rates in school systems. Based on data for the 1964-65 school year, Stennett reported the median days absent, by sex and grade level, for students in four public school districts in a northern, rural county of Minnesota. The absence rate was highest in Kindergarten and declined steadily to Year 4, rose slightly in Year 5, then declined again to Year 7, where it remained steady until Year 10. For Years 11 and 12 the rate rose again. A "chronically poor school attender" was defined as one whose absence rate was above the 75th percentile in five of the six years from Year 1 to Year 6. This is equivalent to between 9 and 14 days per year, from 4.9 to 7.6 percent, based on a 185-day school year.

A European perspective on absence rates was provided in a study of absenteeism in 36 high schools in four Dutch cities. Bos, Ruijters and Visscher examined aspects of absences for individual classes over three school days, a Monday, Wednesday and Friday, covering a total of 8,990 lessons. They differentiated between truancy (disallowed absence, one "without a reason that is considered valid by the school") and allowed absences (one "regarded as valid by the school"). They found variation by school in the determination of a truancy, but calculated overall absence rates of 9.1 percent, comprising a 4.4 percent truancy rate and a 4.7 percent allowed absence rate. Truancy rates were lower in pre-university tracks than vocational education tracks, highest on Fridays, and tended to be
higher later in the school day. Whole-day truancy occurred more frequently on Mondays. The proportion of "non-Dutch" students in the school accounted for 42 percent of the variance in school truancy rate. The authors used schools' administrative data to get a snapshot of truancy, reporting valuable information about truancy and absenteeism in general.

DeJung and Duckworth reported on a study of absences in two cities in the western United States. Examining data from six high schools on class absences rather than whole-day absences, they calculated absence rates of 15 percent for the larger of the two districts, and 10 percent for the smaller. When using whole-day absences only, rates were 4.4 percent for the larger district and 2.8 percent for the smaller. The researchers also asked students why they were absent from individual class periods. Of the 1,200 students in the sample, 20 percent of students stated that they had "other things to do," rather than attend school for a day; illness and personal problems accounted for less than 10 percent of absences. Students with very high absence rates identified parties, drugs and a general dislike of school for most of their absences.

Throughout the 1970s, American high school principals consistently identified poor attendance as the major problem facing secondary school administrators. But rather than define poor attendance, studies concentrated on examining factors associated with it. Wright analysed secondary school-level data in Virginia, surveying schools on their attendance rates and aspects of the curriculum, organisation and staff. He found statistically significant differences by location: urban schools had the lowest attendance rates, then suburban schools; schools in other areas had the highest attendance rates. Within these geographical groupings, different factors were related to attendance rates, including subject offerings (electives), work programs for school credit, and age of the teaching staff.

Reid, using data from an urban comprehensive school in a disadvantaged area of Wales, examined social background factors and self-concept in "persistent" absenteees, which he defined as students with absence rates of 65 percent of every school term, and control groups of matched students, who were "good attenders, usually making 100 percent attendance during an average term." He found differences in family structure, father's occupation, mother's employment and occupation, and eligibility for free school meals. Of the three groups in the study, persistent absenteees also scored lowest on the Brookover scale of academic self-concept, and lowest on the Coopersmith scale of self-esteem, with no differences between male and female absenteees.

Two high schools in Ontario, Canada, contributed data on 54 students to a study to determine the influence of personal, family and school factors on absenteeism. Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams and Dalicandro used discriminant analysis to identify which factors could identify truants. Perceptions of school and parental discipline and control were found to be significant factors, as were students' perceptions of family conflict, academic self-concept and social competence in class. Unfortunately, their sample was severely restricted by selection bias: only 27 of a possible 295 volunteered to participate, and more than two-thirds were female.

Some researchers have attempted to examine the influence of attendance on academic achievement. In 1923, Odell reported small, insignificant correlations between attendance and either academic achievement or intellectual development, but significant correlations between attendance and grades awarded by teachers for class work. Finch and Nemzek reported that school grades were related to student attendance for the 1934 graduating class at one high school in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Kersting compared attendance records for the 100 highest achieving and 100 lowest achieving students in the junior high school where he was teaching. Comparing these extreme groups, he found significant differences
in attendance. These studies show that while there may be a relationship between attendance and achievement, it is very poor attenders whose achievement is low, but no threshold absence rate is defined.

In an attempt to determine a benchmark absence rate for government schools, New South Wales had used five percent as a first step, based on international research on absence in the workplace, to identify schools needing further investigation. While this rate was based on adults in paid employment, it was an early attempt to set a benchmark rate for school attendance, even if it did not discriminate between primary and secondary schools. Data from New South Wales, however, showed that most schools surpassed this benchmark rate, suggesting a need to rethink the benchmark. If this is the case, it remains for state systems to determine a benchmark rate for student absences.

This paper uses three years' worth of detailed administrative data on student absences in South Australian government schools. From these data, collected during Term 2 of each year, it is possible to determine a benchmark rate for student attendance, and to examine relationships between absences and student background factors, supporting what to date has been anecdotal evidence from teachers and contradicting some popular beliefs. Without standard achievement data across schools, it is not possible to examine relationships between attendance and student achievement.

**Description of the Data**

In South Australia, government schools have the capacity to monitor student attendance electronically using computers and software provided by the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE). This software, called EDSAS, allows schools to record the date, type and reason for each student non-attendance. Four types of non-attendance can be recorded: whole-day, morning, afternoon, and late. Sixteen reasons can be recorded, nine of which count as absences. The others, such as sport excursions and work experience, are acceptable reasons for which the student is considered present. This information can then be matched with student information to provide a rich picture of attendance and non-attendance patterns, especially when determining benchmarks for different groups of schools. Available student information, as provided by the school as unit records during the midyear census, includes grade (year level), date of birth, sex, indigenous status, socioeconomic status, and special need.

In 1997 DETE began collecting data on each student absence that occurred during Term 2 from schools that use EDSAS to monitor attendance. The collection was initiated to provide Department officers with data to determine state trends in student attendance, especially as they relate to different groups of students, not to identify individual schools or students with extraordinarily high or low absence rates. A separate, manual collection is conducted at the end of each school year, providing full-year absence rates for each school, but without the detail provided in the Term 2 collection. As the detailed collections accumulate over the years, benchmarks of student attendance for Term 2 can be established.

The data in this paper were collected from schools that use EDSAS to monitor student attendance. For this paper, only whole-day absences for full-time students were used. When absence rates are discussed, the sample was limited to those students who were enrolled at one school for the entire term. The number of students and schools included each year are contained in Table 1. Sample sizes for all subgroups are contained in Appendix A. Comparative enrolment data are from the midyear census, conducted each year on the first Friday on or after 1 August and reported in the National Schools Statistics Collection.
In 1997 and 1998, Term 2 began after the Anzac Day holiday and was ten weeks long. There were two Monday holidays—Adelaide Cup Day (Week 4) and Queen's Birthday (Week 7)—bringing the total number of school days to 48. Term 2 started one week earlier in 1999; with Monday holidays for Anzac Day (Week 2), Adelaide Cup Day (Week 5) and Queen's Birthday (Week 9), there were 52 school days.

### Table 1. Composition of Data Files

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Total (full term)</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>106,585</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Total (all students)</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>109,629</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Total</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>176,511</td>
<td>630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total whole-day absences</td>
<td>371,057</td>
<td>377,355</td>
<td>527,978</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a May include students counted separately at two locations.

### Absence Rates

The overall whole-day absence rate for both 1997 and 1999 was 7.4 percent. Each student was absent on average 3.5 days in Term 2, 1997, and 3.9 days in Term 2, 1999. When examined by level of education, the absence rate for primary students (Reception to Year 7 in South Australia) was 6.1 percent in 1997 and 6.3 percent in 1999, and for secondary students (Years 8 to 12), 9.7 percent in 1997 and 9.4 percent in 1999. Projected over the full school year, 7.4 percent is equivalent to 15 days, or three full weeks of school. But there is no reason to believe that the absence rate in Term 2 is equivalent to the rate in other terms of the school year. Term 2 includes the onset of winter and the only long weekends during school terms.

### Table 2. Absence Rates by Level of Education, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>1997 Students</th>
<th>Absence Rate</th>
<th>1999 Students</th>
<th>Absence Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary (R-7)</td>
<td>68,824</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>86,117</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (8-12)</td>
<td>36,737</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>46,967</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Absence Rates by Grade Level

Student absence rates were lowest in the middle primary years, Years 3, 4 and 5, in both 1997 and 1999, with students absent between 5.6 and 5.8 percent of the time. In the primary years, Reception students had the highest absence rates of 7.2 and 7.4 percent in 1997 and 1999, respectively. For both years, the rate was lowest in Year 3, was relatively stable to Year 5, then peaked in Year 10. In 1997, the second highest rate was in Year 11; in 1999, the second highest rate was in Year 9. Students in ungraded classes (special support classes for primary and secondary students) had absence rates of 9.6 percent in 1997 and 10.4 percent in 1999.

Table 3. Absence Rates by Grade Level, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>1997 Students</th>
<th>Absence Rate</th>
<th>1999 Students</th>
<th>Absence Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>7,005</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>9,156</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>8,377</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>10,596</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>8,599</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>10,886</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>8,986</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>10,853</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>8,774</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>11,186</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>8,973</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>11,204</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>9,120</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>11,089</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>8,990</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>11,147</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>9,005</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>11,235</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>8,877</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>10,973</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>8,213</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>10,396</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>6,471</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>8,616</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>4,171</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>5,747</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Absence Rates by Sex

There was a slight difference in absence rates by sex for Term 2 in both years. Female students were absent 7.5 percent of the time in 1997 and 7.6 percent in 1999; male students were absent 7.3 percent of the time in both 1997 and 1999. The difference between male and female students' absences is equivalent to one whole-day absence every three years.

The differences in the absence rate varied by grade level for each of the two years studied. The pattern of absences by grade level and sex, as shown in Figure 2, is similar to the pattern for all students, shown in Figure 1 above. The female absence rate was higher than the male rate for Reception to Year 5 and Years 10 to 12 in 1997, and for Years 2 to 5 and 9 to 12 in 1999. Only in the middle years-Years 6 to 9 in 1997 and Years 6 to 8 in 1999-did male students have higher absent rates than girls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Term 2 1997</th>
<th>Term 2 1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ungraded</td>
<td>1,024</td>
<td>1,957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Grade Levels</td>
<td>106,585</td>
<td>135,041</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Absence Rates by Grade Level, 1997 and 1999
Table 4. Absence Rates by Grade Level and Sex, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>1997 Female</th>
<th>1997 Male</th>
<th>1999 Female</th>
<th>1999 Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungraded</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Grade Levels</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Absence Rates for Indigenous Students

Indigenous students, who constitute approximately 3.1 percent of all full-time students in South Australian government schools, made up 2.6 percent of the sample in 1997 and 2.7 percent in 1999. Before the sample was trimmed to include only students who had attended one school for the entire term, indigenous students represented 3.0 percent of both samples. There was a significant difference in overall absence rates between indigenous and non-indigenous in Term 2 of each year. Indigenous students were absent 17.0 percent of the time in 1997 and 16.1 percent of the time in 1999. For both 1997 and 1999, absence rates of indigenous students were more than two times the rates of non-indigenous students (see Table 5).

Table 5. Absence Rates by Indigenous Status, Sex and Level of Education, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indigenous Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1,019</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1,062</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Does not include students in ungraded classes.

For indigenous students, the pattern of absence rates by grade level resembles the pattern for all students, with higher rates in the early years, lowest rates in the middle years, and peaks in the middle secondary years. There were also differences by sex, with female students showing higher absence rates than male students at all levels except Reception, Year 5 and Year 6 in 1997, and Reception, Year 2 and Years 5 to 8 in 1999. The difference between female and male indigenous students was 6.4 percentage points in Year 9 in 1997; for the same cohort, as Year 11 in 1999, the female absence rate was 7.8 percentage points higher than the male rate. The overall difference in the absence rate between female and male indigenous students was 0.9 percentage points (17.1% female, 16.2% male). For male indigenous students in Year 12, the absence rate was 9.9 percent, close to the absence rate for non-indigenous students and nearly half the rate of 19.1 percent for female indigenous students.

Table 6. Absence Rates by Grade Level and Sex, Indigenous Students, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Absence Rates by Socioeconomic Status

In South Australia, a student from a family with financial hardship receives a "school card." Between thirty-eight and forty percent of students are school-card holders in any given year. While it has been argued that school card recipients are not necessarily students with the greatest financial need, summary statistics for school card recipients behave similarly to other measures of socioeconomic status (SES). With school card, however, the indicator is dichotomous: a student is either lower SES or not. Data on the percentage of school card...
recipients in a school are similar to data used in the United States on the percentage of children in a school who receive subsidised lunches. For the present analysis, a student who receives a school card is designated as a "lower SES" student; all other students are designated "middle/upper SES."

There was a significant difference in Term 2 absence rates by socioeconomic status (SES). Lower SES students had absence rates of 8.5 percent in 1997 and 8.9 percent in 1999, compared to middle/upper SES students, who had absence rates of 6.8 percent in 1997 and 6.7 percent in 1999. Students from lower SES families had higher absence rates than students from middle/upper SES families at all grade levels—Reception to Year 12—in both 1997 and 1999.

**Table 7. Absence Rates by Socioeconomic Status, Sex and Level of Education, 1997 and 1999**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lower SES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12,700</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>5,590</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13,631</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>5,847</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle/Upper SES Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20,550</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>12,337</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21,943</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>12,913</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Does not include students in ungraded classes.

At Years 6, 8 and 10 in 1997 and at Reception and Years 6 to 9 in 1999, males had higher absence rates than females among lower-SES students. The difference between male and female absence rates for lower-SES students in Year 12 was 2.1 percentage points in 1997 and 1.5 points in 1999. As seen for indigenous students, the pattern in absence rates by grade level is similar to the pattern for all students, with the lowest rates occurring in the middle primary years, and rates peaking in middle secondary.
Table 8. Absence Rates by Grade Level and Sex, Lower SES Students, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungraded</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Grade Levels</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.6%</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.4%</strong></td>
<td><strong>9.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.8%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Absence Rates by Location: Students in Country Schools and in Metropolitan Schools

South Australian government schools are designated country or metropolitan, based on the classification used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. According to the ABS definition, the Adelaide metropolitan area includes all suburbs located between Willunga, 40 kilometres south of the city, and Gawler, 40 kilometres to the north. The eastern border is generally the Adelaide Hills, 20 kilometres from the city, except for the area around Stirling, along the South-Eastern Freeway. Gulf St Vincent forms the western border. All other parts of South Australia are considered country.
Table 9. Absence Rates by Location, Sex and Level of Education, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12,575</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td>5,878</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13,603</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,415</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20,675</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td>12,072</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21,971</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td>12,372</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Does not include students in ungraded classes.

In both 1997 and 1999, country primary students had a higher absence rate than metropolitan primary students, but country secondary students had a lower absence rate than metropolitan secondary students. In both years in country schools, the overall absence rate for male primary students was equivalent to the overall rate for female primary students. In 1999, students in Reception in country schools had an absence rate of 8.5 percent, 1.7 percentage points higher than the rate for Reception students in metropolitan schools. This is the largest difference between country and metropolitan students at any grade level. In the secondary grades, country students had higher absence rates than metropolitan students in Years 8, 10 and 11 in 1997, and metropolitan students had a higher absence rates than country students in all grades in 1999.

Table 10. Absence Rates by Grade Level and Location, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungraded</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Grade Levels</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Absence Rates by Grade Level and Location, 1997 and 1999
Absence Rates for Students with Negotiated Curriculum Plans

Students with negotiated curriculum plans (NCPs) are students with special learning needs. Students with physical disabilities work to NCPs, as do students with behavioural problems and learning disabilities. Students with NCPs had higher absence rates than students without NCPs. In 1999, male and female students with NCPs had equivalent absence rates at both primary and secondary levels.

Students with NCPs followed the general pattern of absence rates through the grade levels as other groups, with one major difference: NCP students' absence rates were relatively stable through the middle and upper primary grades in both 1997 and 1999 (see Figure 7). From Reception to Year 5 and in Year 12, female NCP students had higher absence rates than male NCP students. Male NCP students had higher absence rates than female NCP students from Year 6 to Year 11.

Table 11. Absence Rates by Negotiated Curriculum Plan Status, Sex and Level of Education, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Negotiated Curriculum Plans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2,094</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students without Negotiated Curriculum Plans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32,251</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33,480</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Does not include students in ungraded classes.
Table 12. Absence Rates by Grade Level and Sex, Students with Negotiated Curriculum Plans, 1997 and 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>1997 Female</th>
<th>1997 Male</th>
<th>1999 Female</th>
<th>1999 Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungraded</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Grade Levels</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Patterns of Absence**

**Absences per Student**

The absence rates reported above were calculated using all students as the basis, but not all students were absent during Term 2 in 1997 and 1999. Nearly one in four students (24.2 percent) had no whole-day absences in 1997; this figure dropped to 21.8 percent in 1999, which had one more week (four more days and one more Monday holiday) in the term. Of the 106,585 full-time students in the 1997 group, 6.6 percent had 11 or more whole-day absences during the term; 7.8 percent of the 135,041 students in 1999 had 11 or more absences. There were 232 students (0.2%) in 1997 and 378 (0.3%) in 1999 with more than 40 whole-day absences during the term. According to the schools' data, these students had not officially left the school during the term, and had not been granted exemptions.

For all groups of students and in both 1997 and 1999, male students had more absence-free terms than female students (see Table 13 and Figure 7). Among indigenous students, 15.6 percent in 1997 and 14.7 percent in 1999 had no whole-day absences during the term, significantly lower than the 24.2 percent and 21.8 percent, respectively, for all students in those years. Among lower SES students, 21.5 percent in 1997 and 18.5 percent in 1999 had no whole-day absences. Students attending country schools had fewer absence-free terms than did students in metropolitan schools.

**Table 13. Percentage Distribution of Students in Each Absence Band, by Group, 1997 and 1999**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Days Absent During Term 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>41+</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 1997</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 1997</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>15.0% 37.1%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>20.9% 54.1%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>21.0% 56.5%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>24.5% 54.8%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCP</td>
<td>22.4% 48.7%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fewer than 10 percent of all students had more than two weeks of absences during Term 2 in either 1997 or 1999. Among lower-SES students, slightly more than 10 percent missed more than two weeks of school in Term 2, and among indigenous students, more than 25 percent missed more than two weeks (see Figure 7).

Absences by Day of the Term

As noted above, 1998 student data used to determine the denominator in the calculation of absence rates were not available; however, the data on individual absences could still be used in an examination of absences. For 1997 and 1999, the previously reported data can be supplemented with all other data on absences, including those for students who did not attend the school for the entire term. Two of these analyses-on absences by when they occurred in the term and when they occurred during the week-are contained in the present section. A third analysis, examining the reasons recorded with each absence, is reported in the following section.

The first analysis examined when absences occurred through the term, and whether there were any differences related to student background characteristics. In 1997, absences increased from Week 1 to Week 3, with a relatively high number of absences on the Friday before the Adelaide Cup long weekend (the end of Week 3; see Figure 8). The day after this long weekend also had a higher number of absences for a Tuesday. Absences were then fairly constant during the middle weeks of the term, with fewer absences on the Friday before the Queen's Birthday long weekend. From there until the end of the term, absences
increased steadily. Absences on the last day of Term 2 were generally twice the average for all other days of the term.

Figure 8. Whole Day Absences by Day of the Term, 1997

There was no consistency in which long weekends were associated with the number of absences on Fridays and Tuesdays. In 1998, the Adelaide Cup long weekend had no special absences on the Friday or the Tuesday, and the Queen's Birthday long weekend did. And in 1999, the Anzac Day long weekend had more absences on the Friday, but not on the Tuesday, and the Queen's Birthday long weekend had more absences on the Tuesday, but not on the Friday. The Adelaide Cup long weekend had no extraordinary absences. For all three years in the study, country students had more absences on every Friday before a long weekend. Consistent across all three years is the absence on the Monday before the Adelaide Cup long weekend. In 1997 and 1998, this was the Monday of Week 3; in 1999, Week 4.

Absences by Day of the Week

Absences occurred most frequently on Fridays (22.4% to 22.6%) and Mondays (20.8% to 21.2%), and least frequently on Wednesdays (18.4% to 18.6%, see Table 14). In each year, male students’ preponderance for Friday absences was higher than female students’,
although the difference was slight. One fourth of indigenous students' absences occurred on Fridays; country students also had more absences on Fridays (see Figure 9).

Table 14. Percentage Distribution of Absences by Day of the Week, by Group, 1997-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Lower SES</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Metropolitan</th>
<th>All Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9. Absences by Day of the Week, by Group, 1999

Reasons for Absence

Schools use a field in EDSAS to record the reason for each student's non-attendance. When an occurrence of non-attendance is first entered into EDSAS at the school, the reason is given as "unexplained" if the teacher does not know why the student is away. Once the school receives an explanation, usually a note from the student's carer, the reason field is adjusted. For a number of reasons, not all schools adjust the reason field immediately, leaving many non-attendances recorded without explanation. This information was examined as part of the present analysis, although there were some concerns about the data, particularly with the high number of unexplained absences.

Reasons for Absence, by Grade Level and Sex

The distribution of reasons for whole-day absence over the three years was fairly stable, with between 37 and 45 percent of absences for illness, most frequently without a medical certificate (shown as Illness/Parent in Table 15). Family/social reasons accounted for
approximately one in six absences. Between 34 and 39 percent of absences were unexplained. There were negligible differences by sex, except for suspensions and exclusions: In all years, male students were absent for suspensions and exclusions about four times as often as female students were.

Table 15. Percentage Distribution of Absences by Reason and Sex, 1997-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illness/Certificate</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness/Parent</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Social</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemption</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension/Exclusion</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexplained</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Absences</td>
<td>182,515</td>
<td>188,542</td>
<td>184,405</td>
<td>192,950</td>
<td>261,604</td>
<td>266,374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The proportion of absences recorded as unexplained was lowest in primary grades, accounting for approximately 30 percent of absences. Unexplained absences increased steadily through the secondary grades, including Year 12 (see Figure 10). Illness with a medical certificate was the reason for about 1 percent of absences through the primary grades, and also increased steadily through the secondary grades. Family/social reasons
were steady through the primary grades, around 20 percent, then decreased steadily through the secondary grades. Suspensions and exclusions were more frequent in Years 8, 9 and 10 than in other grades.

Reasons for Absence, Indigenous Students

Reasons for absence were examined for indigenous and non-indigenous students at each year level, but the number of absences for some reasons in some year levels was too small for reliable analysis. Overall, the percentage of indigenous students’ unexplained absences, for both females and males, was much higher than the percentage of non-indigenous students’ unexplained absences. There was a small difference between indigenous and non-indigenous students in the percentage of absences for family and social reasons.

Table 16. Percentage Distribution of Absences by Reason and Indigenous Status, 1997-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illness/Certificate</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness/Parent</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Social</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemption</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension/Exclusion</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexplained</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Absences</td>
<td>23,382</td>
<td>347,675</td>
<td>23,348</td>
<td>354,007</td>
<td>32,467</td>
<td>495,506</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons for Absence, Lower SES Students

Reasons for absence were also examined for students according to socioeconomic status. Overall, the percentage of lower SES students’ unexplained absences, for both females and males, was higher than the percentage of middle/upper SES students’ unexplained absences. There was little difference between by SES in the percentage of absences for illness with a medical certificate. The proportion of absences for family and social reasons was higher for middle/upper SES students than for lower SES students.

Table 17. Percentage Distribution of Absences by Reason and Socioeconomic Status, 1997-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illness/Certificate</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reasons for Absence, Students in Country Schools and in Metropolitan Schools

In all three years, the percentage of absences for family/social reasons was higher for country students than for metropolitan students. The percentage of absences for illness, with a doctor's certificate and without, was higher for metropolitan students in all three years.

Table 18. Percentage Distribution of Absences by Reason and Location, 1997-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness/Certificate</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness/Parent</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Social</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemption</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension/Exclusion</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexplained</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Absences</td>
<td>115,449</td>
<td>255,608</td>
<td>134,005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons for Absence and Long Weekends

The 1999 data were analysed for reasons for absences on all days of the term. A greater proportion of absences were unexplained on Fridays than on any other day of the week. On the Fridays preceding the Adelaide Cup Day long weekend and the Queen's Birthday long weekend, the proportion of absences that were for family/social reasons increased (see Figure 11). This increase was especially pronounced for two groups of students: those in country schools and middle/upper SES students. For lower SES students and indigenous students, these Fridays brought no increase in the percentage of absences for family/social reasons.
Discussion

The overall whole-day absence rate for full-time students reported above is generally consistent with rates reported elsewhere. For 1996, New South Wales reported a whole-day absence rate of 6.75 percent for students in Years 1-9, the years of compulsory schooling. The comparable rates in South Australia for 1997 and 1999, using Term 2 data, were 6.6 and 6.9 percent, respectively. From this perspective, absence rates for South Australian government school students appear to be reasonable, if not necessarily acceptable. South Australian rates are generally consistent with standards in a number of American states.

The greatest difficulty in determining a benchmark rate of non-attendance is the quality of data on the reasons students were absent. It appears from the data presented here that too many student absences are unexplained, suggesting a problem of student truancy; but the knowledge that many unexplained codes may not be adjusted by schools—even if they are recorded correctly in teachers’ roll books—demonstrates that a truancy rate can not be accurately calculated. Unexplained absences are just that, absences for which no explanation was received by the school. An increase in the number of absences because of truancy was reported in the United States between the 1950s and 1970s, with a concurrent
decrease in the proportion of absences for illness. The proportion of absences in South Australia that are unexplained is not necessarily extraordinary.

Although this report has concentrated on student absences, one important finding, which is often overlooked, is that between one in four and one in five full-time students had no whole-day absences during the term. Among indigenous students, nearly one in six had no whole-day absences. As a result, overall absence rates are heavily influenced by students with high rates of non-attendance. As noted above, the issue of non-attendance may be one of "alienation from education" rather than "truancy," and they may both by symptoms of a similar underlying cause. Rates of full attendance (the proportion of students with full attendance in each school) could be used to indicate positive attitudes toward education, as an alternative to absence rates per school.

Regardless of the limitations of some aspects of the data reported here, there are issues that should be investigated further. At almost every year level, the absence rate for indigenous students was double the rate for non-indigenous students. This is especially crucial in the early years, where rates for indigenous students were approaching three times the rate for non-indigenous students. If learning outcomes for indigenous students are to improve, it is imperative that attendance rates in the early years improve first.

Differences were reported in reasons for absence, with indigenous students much more likely than non-indigenous students to have unexplained absences, and much less likely to have absences explained as an illness. Fewer than one percent of indigenous students' absences were explained by a medical certificate. Lower SES students were more likely than middle-upper SES students to have unexplained absences, but there was no significant difference by SES on the percentage of absences explained by a medical certificate.

It has been suggested that many indigenous students' absences are explained as "family/social" reasons, that teachers use this reason when they do not receive a formal excuse. The data do not bear out this claim, although it is possible that the "true" level of family/social reasons for indigenous students' absences is lower than reported here. There was no significant difference between indigenous and non-indigenous students in the percentage of absences explained as "family/social"; in fact, non-indigenous students had a slightly higher proportion of absences explained as "family/social." Similarly, lower SES students were less likely than middle-upper SES students to have absences explained as "family/social."

Further research needs to be conducted to examine the use of "family/social" as an excuse for student non-attendance. Should such absences be considered "acceptable"? Do different groups of students use the reason differently? It appears that middle-upper SES students use the reason for long weekends; this does not appear to be the case for lower SES or indigenous students. If this is the case, then there may be greater use of "family/social" for indigenous students when it is not appropriate. Closer examination of teachers' roll-marking may offer some explanation here.

The intersection of some aspects of disadvantage-indigenous status, socioeconomic status and sex were investigated, especially at different year levels, but no conclusive influence was found on rates of non-attendance. Analysis of the interactions added no further understanding above simple additive factors. While there is no evidence of interaction at the student level, further investigation needs to determine the interaction between student factors and school factors. Do indigenous students' absence rates vary according to the proportion of indigenous students in the total school population? Is school location related to absence rate differences by socioeconomic status?
This analysis concentrated on whole-day absences for full-time students who remained in one school for the entire term. Other data in the collection relate to half-day absences and late arrivals, and to students who changed schools during the term. Analysis of these data is necessary to determine if patterns of whole-day absence correlate with patterns of half-day attendance and lateness, and whether students who change schools mid-term have different overall patterns of attendance. If so, the argument for poor attendance as a symptom would be bolstered.

These data also need to be linked to student achievement data. With three years of absence data and a continuing collection, it may be possible to identify poor attenders over time. To date, these links have not been attempted. If successful, a record of poor attendance may then be matched with student achievement data, as they become available, to determine that relationship. It would then be possible to identify schools with successful attendance programs and positive academic outcomes.

A related issue is the monitoring of student attendance in general. As with any computerised data management system, there are different levels of acceptance by users and different levels of use. Not every data system meets every user’s needs; teachers must find time to transfer information from a roll book to a computer database. Until such time as computerised attendance data monitoring is the standard in schools, replacing roll books, some electronic data will remain less reliable than others.

Finally, this paper has shown how state education departments can use their administrative data to inform policy discussions. The data for 1997 absences were first reported to senior department officers in April 1999, resulting in further discussion involving attendance program managers. District superintendents are being provided summaries of the data for their districts, including some details on differences by groups, where possible. Institutional research has had a strong role in American universities, and is becoming more prominent in Australian universities and TAFE institutes. With increasing use of performance monitoring in government agencies and moves toward local school management in public education systems, it is imperative that benchmarks be validated against actual data, and targets be set using those benchmarks.

### Appendix A. Sample Sizes, 1997 and 1999

**Table A1. Students in Sample, by Grade, Sex, Indigenous Status, Socioeconomic Status, School Location and Negotiated Curriculum Plan Status, 1997**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>NCP</th>
<th>No NCP</th>
<th>Missing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recepti</td>
<td>7,005</td>
<td>3,270</td>
<td>3,735</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>6,739</td>
<td>2,695</td>
<td>4,310</td>
<td>2,824</td>
<td>4,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>8,377</td>
<td>4,065</td>
<td>4,312</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>8,117</td>
<td>3,278</td>
<td>5,099</td>
<td>3,287</td>
<td>5,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>8,599</td>
<td>4,076</td>
<td>4,523</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>8,325</td>
<td>3,384</td>
<td>5,215</td>
<td>3,325</td>
<td>5,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>8,986</td>
<td>4,324</td>
<td>4,662</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>8,712</td>
<td>3,450</td>
<td>5,536</td>
<td>3,370</td>
<td>5,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>8,774</td>
<td>4,260</td>
<td>4,514</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>8,504</td>
<td>3,362</td>
<td>5,412</td>
<td>3,287</td>
<td>5,487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>8,973</td>
<td>4,437</td>
<td>4,536</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>8,739</td>
<td>3,415</td>
<td>5,558</td>
<td>3,459</td>
<td>5,514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>9,120</td>
<td>4,455</td>
<td>4,665</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>8,864</td>
<td>3,453</td>
<td>5,667</td>
<td>3,339</td>
<td>5,781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>8,990</td>
<td>4,363</td>
<td>4,627</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>8,743</td>
<td>3,294</td>
<td>5,696</td>
<td>3,377</td>
<td>5,613</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Grades

| Year 12 | 4,171 |
| Year 11 | 6,471 |
| Year 10 | 8,213 |
| Year 9  | 8,877 |
| Year 8  | 4,350 |
| Year 7  | 225  |
| Year 6  | 3,217 |
| Year 5  | 3,048 |
| Year 4  | 8,780 |
| Year 3  | 5,777 |
| Year 2  | 5,822 |
| Year 1  | 5,207 |
| Others  | 1,024 |
| All     | 106,585 |

### Notes: "Missing" indicates students for whom there was no information on indigenous status, SES or NCP status. Location is based on school location.

### Table A2. Students in Sample, by Grade, Sex, Indigenous Status, Socioeconomic Status, School Location and Negotiated Curriculum Plan Status, 1999

<table>
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<th>Grade</th>
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<th>Male</th>
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<th>No</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Metro</th>
<th>NCP</th>
<th>No NCP</th>
<th>Missing</th>
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<td>5,132</td>
<td>5,464</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>10,251</td>
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<td>6,706</td>
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<td>6,860</td>
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<td>5,616</td>
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<td>3,920</td>
<td>7,266</td>
<td>3,691</td>
<td>7,495</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>10,597</td>
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<td>334</td>
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<td>10,951</td>
<td>3,581</td>
<td>7,654</td>
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<td>7,073</td>
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<td>302</td>
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<td>2,625</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5,702</td>
<td>1,253</td>
<td>4,494</td>
<td>1,586</td>
<td>4,161</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>5,610</td>
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<td>1,23</td>
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<td>3,651</td>
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<td>90,589</td>
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</table>

### Notes: "Missing" indicates students for whom there was no information on indigenous status, SES or NCP status. Location is based on school location.
Appendix B. Reasons for Student Absences, 1997-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Illness/Certificate</th>
<th>Illness/Parent</th>
<th>Family/Social</th>
<th>Exemption</th>
<th>Suspension/Exclusion</th>
<th>Unexplained</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total Absences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reception</td>
<td></td>
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<td>0.9%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
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<td>0.1%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
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<td>0.1%</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
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<td>0.2%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>12,192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>43.4%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>12,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
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<td>0.2%</td>
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<td>22.5%</td>
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<td>2.1%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.9%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
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<td>0.9%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
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<td>0.7%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
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<td>37.3%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
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<th>Illness/Parent</th>
<th>Family/Social</th>
<th>Exemption</th>
<th>Suspension/Exclusion</th>
<th>Unexplained</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total Absences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
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<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>13,274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Illness/Certificate</td>
<td>Illness/Paren</td>
<td>Family/Social</td>
<td>Exemption</td>
<td>Suspension/Exclusion</td>
<td>Unexplained</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Total Absences</td>
</tr>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
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<td>23.9%</td>
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<td>0.3%</td>
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<td>2.1%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
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Table B2. Student Absences by Sex, Year Level and Reason, 1998
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<td>1.9%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
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<td>2.1%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
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<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>17,526</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.9%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
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<td>8,743</td>
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<td>1.2%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>1,557</td>
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<td>3.6%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
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<td>184,405</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Illness/ Certificate</th>
<th>Illnesses/ Parent</th>
<th>Family/ Social</th>
<th>Exemption</th>
<th>Suspension/Exclusion</th>
<th>Unexplained</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total Absences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Recept</td>
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<td>49.7%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
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<td>2.6%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>13,491</td>
</tr>
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<td>5.7%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
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<td>17.0%</td>
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<td>1.3%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
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Table B3. Student Absences by Sex, Year Level and Reason, 1999

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<th>Illness/Certificate</th>
<th>Illness/Parenthood</th>
<th>Family/Social</th>
<th>Exemption</th>
<th>Suspension/Exclusion</th>
<th>Unexplained</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total Absences</th>
</tr>
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<td>18.5%</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
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<td>1.6%</td>
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<td>Family/Social</td>
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<td>Suspension/Exclusion</td>
<td>Unexplained</td>
<td>Other</td>
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The author acknowledges assistance in the developmental stages of this study from Margaret Ford, Shirley Dally and Dan Turner of the Department of Education, Training and Employment. All content is solely the responsibility of the author.