School Attendance in Manitoba
Prepared for: Manitoba Education, Citizenship & Youth
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Manitoba

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was prepared for the Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth (MECY) in order to examine pre-existing research and to conduct interviews with key stakeholders across Manitoba regarding issues and factors relating to the topic of school attendance. The findings are meant to assist in the development of potential interventions to decrease school leaving and reduce absenteeism.

The key findings in this report, as well as recommendations, were prepared by Probe Research and are based on results arising from a number of methodological components, including secondary research, interviews with directors of community stakeholders and educators, roundtables with students, educators, and parents, and a publicly accessible website survey.

Key Findings Arising from the Research

Section 3.0 "Attendance and Absenteeism"

- ⮞ The term "attendance" as it is used by those who are involved in the education system, including teachers, parents and students, pertains to whether or not the student is physically present in the classroom or school during a regular school day.

- ⮞ There are discrepancies with regard to population data and school enrolment data as they pertain to Manitobans who are aged five through eighteen.

- ⮞ The secondary research shows that close to 90 percent of those students in Winnipeg who have three identifiable risk factors in their lives (that is, having a teen mother, having contact with Child and Family Services, and residing in a household that has relied on income assistance) do not complete the requirements for a high school degree.

Section 4.0 "Student Perspectives on Absenteeism"

- ⮞ Many students underplay the significance of missing the occasional class. Furthermore, because "lateness" generates an absenteeism report, students who find themselves late for a class – due to an event such as missing a bus or being late upon returning from lunch – will decide to be absent for subsequent classes that day.

- ⮞ Students recognize the critically important role played by their parents with regard to promoting better attendance. This includes what might appear as small things such as waking their children in the morning, or listening to their concerns and being supportive.

- ⮞ Lifestyle-related choices can negatively influence a student's engagement in learning, and thereby affect school attendance and drop-out rates. Students need to be encouraged to make informed decisions about these choices, including those pertaining to drugs and alcohol.

➲ Some school divisions have employed School Resource Officers (SROs) and used external organizations such as the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) to promote student choices relating to health and school safety.

➲ In some communities transportation-related issues can inhibit school attendance. This includes access to reliable transportation, especially among children whose parent(s) are unable to drive students to their schools.

➲ Childcare issues are a cause for some high school students to miss classes. This includes students who are parents of young children or a new baby as well as students who are required to stay home to take care of siblings. Some schools seek to address this issue by instituting childcare support programs for both student offspring and siblings.

➲ Students recognize that principals and vice-principals play an important role in the personal lives of students who have attendance-related problems. This is due to the relatively high level of interaction that occurs between administrators and students when such issues arise.

Section 5.0 "Perspectives Regarding Family / Home"

➲ Varying levels of commitment among parents to education and school attendance can be influenced by their own upbringing, personal experiences, and situational factors, such as challenges relating to mobility and low income.

➲ Some parents believe that their children's schools could do a better job communicating with them about attendance issues. In many cases, the school's efforts are thwarted due to children being able to intercept calls or letters from the school when they pertain to attendance issues.

➲ Schools should be made to be more inviting. Among the different stakeholders, including parents, children, and teachers, there is agreement that raising comfort levels in the schools makes it easier for children to have higher attendance rates.

➲ While many parents appear engaged with educators at their children's schools, there appears to be a large number of parents who fall outside the collaborative orbit of educators.

Section 6.0 "Attendance and the Role of Schools"

➲ It is important that school materials and curricula are suited to the modern interests of school children. This might include developing new areas of applied learning and skills training, as well as enhancing creative in-class approaches to learning. This is especially important for those who have attendance-related challenges.

➲ Some school administrators report that having systematic procedures by which staff and teachers are assigned to have daily contact with specifically identified students who are at risk has been effective for reducing absenteeism.

➲ There is a strong sense that student engagement leads to higher attendance rates. School-sponsored extracurricular activities as well as before-and-after school programs are an important component for furthering this end and should be further encouraged.

➲ School attendance policies are not consistent throughout the school divisions in the province.

Section 7.0, "Community Concerns"

- ➲ There are many departments and programs that are involved in promoting child development and learning within local communities, including efforts to reduce absenteeism.

- ➲ Lighthouse programs and other after-hours programs are an effective way to help students who are at risk find a safe place to learn and recreate.

- ➲ Ways by which community members can be better involved in promoting school attendance in their local area should be explored further. This includes parents of school-aged children as well as grassroots community organizations.

- ➲ Many School Divisions have chosen to use "community outreach workers" in place of truancy officers in order to better address the underlying cause of truant behaviours. This is done by seeking out better communication channels with families of absentee students.

- ➲ Concerns are raised by some community stakeholders and teachers that insufficient resources have been devoted in some communities to those who perform the role of truancy officers or community outreach workers.

Recommendations Arising from the Research

Based on Section 3.0, "Attendance and Absenteeism", the following recommendations are put forward:

- ➲ MECY should explore how it might better track enrolments and attendance across the province with regard to all school age children in the province, and consider having enrolment figures collected at least twice a year.

- ➲ With regard to measuring enrolment figures, dropouts, and absenteeism, MECY should work with the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics to explore ways to address discrepancies that currently exist between enrolment data and other population estimates for school age children.

- ➲ The Province should continue to collaborate with the Council of Education Ministers, Canada (CMEC) and the Canadian Education Statistics Council (CESC) in their efforts to investigate the best means by which students can be "tracked" as they move across provincial and school division jurisdictions, and as they advance through the school system.

- ➲ MECY should work in partnership with other departments in light of a key finding arising from the secondary research concerning children who are at risk and residing in low income circumstances.

Based on Section 4.0, "Student Perspectives on Absenteeism", the following recommendations are put forward:

- ➲ In order to prevent students from developing absentee-related habits, schools in partnership with families should further develop ways to inform students of the ramifications of missing classes, stressing that one skipped class can be too many.

- ➲ Students need to be reminded about how lifestyle-related choices, including the use of drugs and alcohol as well as their after-effects, can negatively affect school attendance and completion rates.

➲ MECY should explore how school-related childcare programs are provided across the Province, and support these programs where needs are warranted.

➲ MECY should seek input from principals and vice-principals when developing new attendance-related strategies.

Based on Section 5.0, "Perspectives Regarding Family / Home", the following recommendations are put forward:

➲ MECY should explore ways by which school attendance can be promoted more strongly. Parents need to be informed that daily school attendance is mandatory (not optional) and very important for all children. Furthermore, parents should be informed that absenteeism leads to incomplete grades and dropping out of school, and that schooling is important for personal development and later employment.

➲ MECY should further develop a strategy by which schools work with parents, students, and communities to ensure that parents who otherwise would not be engaged in their children's schooling will feel welcome to visit the schools of their children and collaborate with teachers on issues pertaining to their children's development. This could include the promotion of family or community events held in the school facilities in order to increase the comfort levels of parents who would otherwise not visit a school.

➲ MECY should develop ways by which parents, schools and communities could work together to identify ways to increase and enhance communications with parents who are marginalized and/or reside in low income households. Of particular concern are those whose children are deemed to be at risk.

Based on Section 6.0, "Attendance and the Role of Schools", the following recommendations are put forward:

➲ Both students and parents commonly report reliability problems relating to notifications of absenteeism being intercepted by the students themselves. Therefore, and where practical, schools should continue to use, or begin using, a "two-avenue" notification system, such as e-mail or cell phone notifications in addition to telephoning households.

➲ Schools need to address the connection between "lateness" and absenteeism, whereby students who are late will be less inclined to miss an entire half- or full-day of school.

➲ MECY should examine the systematic procedures being used by some schools to encourage daily contact with students who are at risk. This would be to determine the common factors that make these programs successful.

➲ In order to prevent students undergoing suspensions from developing absentee-related habits, schools along with families should be encouraged to find ways by which suspended students can continue to work on their studies without being physically absent from the school.

➲ To promote consistency, MECY should provide guidance to school divisions with regard to attendance policies.

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Based on Section 7.0, "Community Concerns", the following recommendations are put forward:

➲ Because there are many departments and programs that are involved in promoting child development and learning, including the reduction of absenteeism, the Province should continue to work to ensure that departments are coordinating their efforts in an effective manner.

➲ Attention needs to be paid regarding the extent to which young children who are at risk are receiving the support that they need to learn and recreate.

➲ Further work is needed for government, communities, and existing grassroots organizations to work together to have in place safe after-hours programs and recreational opportunities for children.

➲ MECY should continue to promote existing "safe route" corridors and support efforts to create new ones in areas where these are warranted.

➲ MECY in partnership with school districts should explore the current function and role of community outreach workers and truancy officers, while determining if additional resources or training is required for these individuals.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

In December, 2008, the Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth engaged the services of Probe Research Inc. in order to examine pre-existing research and to conduct interviews with key stakeholders across Manitoba regarding issues and factors relating to the topic of school attendance. The findings are meant to "assist in the development of potential interventions to decrease school leaving and reduce absenteeism."[1]

This report was prepared by Christopher Adams and Curtis Brown of Probe Research, with research support from other individuals at Probe Research including Kevin McDougald, Lloyd Fridfinnson, Rosemary Fletcher, as well as Nav Ghundhu, of DataProbe Inc., who conducted many of the executive interviews.

The authors of this report would like to thank the students, parents, teachers, administrators, organizations, and community stakeholders who participated in the roundtables, in-depth interviews, and surveys. A list of participating organizations is included in Section 2, "Methodology", of this report.

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[1] Joanna Blais, Director, Program and Student Services Branch, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, letter to Superintendents of Education and other stakeholders, February 4, 2009.

2.0   METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on a number of methodological components, including secondary research, interviews with directors of community stakeholders and educators, roundtables with students, educators, and parents, and a publicly accessible website survey. Each of these is described below.

2.1   Secondary Research

A research review was conducted based on pre-existing reports, data, and other information pertaining to how we might better understand the context of school attendance issues in Manitoba. This phase of the research included an examination of the following resources:

- Relevant Manitoba population profiles and census data relating to school age children
- High school completion statistics as provided by Statistics Canada
- Enrolment statistics as provided by Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth
- Manitoba government press releases and communication materials
- Government documents from other jurisdictions
- Reports and education-related journal articles

2.2   Roundtable Sessions

A number of roundtable sessions were held with students, parents, educators, and individuals across different provincial government departments who work closely with issues relating to school attendance issues.

The following roundtable sessions were held:

- Two roundtable sessions which were held on February 23rd and 24th with internal provincial government stakeholders representing Family Services and Housing, Health, Justice, and Education, Citizenship and Youth.
- Three roundtable sessions were held with high school students. These included:
  - One session in Winnipeg with Metro Division students on February 24th
  - One roundtable session in The Pas with students of Margaret Barbour Collegiate on March 17th
  - One roundtable session in Dauphin with students of the Dauphin Regional Composite Secondary School on March 24th

- Three roundtable sessions were held with educators, parents, and interested community members. These included:
    - One session at John Norquay School in Point Douglas on March 3rd
    - One roundtable session with parents, educators, and community members of The Pas and from nearby Opaskwayak Cree Nation was held on March 17th
    - One roundtable session with parents and community members in Dauphin was held on March 24th

2.3   Interviews with Key Stakeholders

A large number of interviews were conducted by Probe Research with representatives of non-government organizations that are directly involved in the education sector. This includes the following:

- Broadway Neighbourhood Centre
- Innovative Learning Centre
- Jobworks Youth Builders Program
- Ma Mawi Chi Itata Centre - The Future Is Yours Project
- Macdonald Youth Services (STEP Program)
- Manitoba Association Of Parent Councils
- Manitoba Association of School Superintendants
- Manitoba Association Of School Trustees
- Manitoba Council for Leadership In Education
- Manitoba Federation of Independent Schools Inc.
- Manitoba Métis Federation
- Manitoba School Improvement Program
- Manitoba Teachers Society
- New Directions For Children, Youth, Adults And Families
- Point Douglas Residents Committee
- Rainbow Resource Centre
- Resource Assistance For Youth
- Student Service Administrators Association.
- Youth Emergency Educational Service

2.4   Surveys with Directors of Friendship Centres and Lighthouse Programs

In February, 2009, Probe Research contacted the offices of executive directors for ten Friendship Centres across Manitoba and sent a survey accompanied with a personalized letter. Responses were received from the following Friendship Centres:

- Brandon Friendship Centre
- Lynn Lake Friendship Centre Inc.
- Portage Friendship Centre Inc.
- Riverton and District Friendship Centre
- Selkirk Friendship Centre

A letter and faxback survey was sent to approximately 50 directors of Lighthouse programs[2] across Manitoba on March 5, with a reminder note from both the provincial coordinator and our Probe Research offices sent two weeks later. This effort has generated 13 responses from representatives of the following programs:

- Black River Education Authority (Lighthouse)
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Winnipeg
- Eagles Fire Youth Centre
- Lac Du Bonnet Youth Centre
- Lighthouse Program - North End/ Point Douglas Winnipeg
- Moose Lake Lighthouse Starters
- Ralph Brown Community Centre Inc.
- Riverton and District Friendship Centre (Lighthouse)
- S.O.S. Lighthouses
- Teen Stop Jeunesse Inc.
- Wapanohk Community School
- Westdale School
- Youth for Christ

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[2] These are funded through Manitoba Justice. Their role and function is described as follows: "Lighthouses offer youth positive environments and…operate in many communities throughout Manitoba. Activities usually take place at least once a week." See <http://www.gov.mb.ca/justice/safe/lighthouses/index.html> accessed March 28, 2009.

2.5   *Interviews with School Principals*

Principals (or their designated representatives) were interviewed based on a list of eleven schools provided by Education, Citizenship and Youth. The following schools participated in this study:

- Argyle Alternative School
- College Louis Riel
- George Waters Middle School
- Helen Betty Osborne Ininiw Education Resources Centre
- Maples Collegiate
- Oscar Blackburn School
- Portage La Prairie Collegiate Institute
- St. John's High School
- Sister Macnamara School
- Springfield Middle School
- Virden Collegiate

2.6   *Publicly Accessible Web-Based Survey*

Individuals who were unable to attend any of the roundtable sessions or participate in an interview were invited to provide input via a web-based survey (provided in both French and English). This online survey contained many of the same areas of inquiry which were used in the roundtable discussions and interviews. As of April 15, 2009, a total of 24 individuals logged onto the website and completed a survey.

3.0   ATTENDANCE AND ABSENTEEISM

Of interest to the researchers for this project was how individuals from different parts of the province and who have differing relationships with the education system share similar understandings of what constitutes school "attendance" and "absenteeism" and the degree to which they view absenteeism as being a problem for Manitobans.

3.1   Defining Attendance

The most basic description of attendance – as put forward by most of the study's participants – is that a student is present in the school or classroom "on the days when [he or she] is supposed to be." This is an entry point to being able to engage students in the process of learning. By students being physically present, teachers are able to design strategies by which engagement can occur. As one teacher noted, however, students may be present even if they are not physically within a classroom, as they may be "... supervised in the office, in [a] resource [classroom], [or] in a learning assistance room."

While attendance is the most basic "starting point" for learning, some respondents in nearly every stakeholder group made an important distinction between a student's physical presence in class and whether or not he or she is actively engaged in learning. As one government stakeholder reported: "Physical attendance does not mean engagement." One community stakeholder nicely summarized what this means in a way that was reflected by many other participants:

> *Non-attendance would be the child not physically showing up for school and a lack of participation in class. Attendance would be full participation in school, coming to school and participating in class attendance and so forth.*

Some respondents also noted that attendance requirements differ based on the grade level. For many students in elementary school or junior high, attendance is often taken on a half-day basis, while for many high school students, it is recorded on a period-by-period basis.

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3.2   Defining Absenteeism

The most basic way by which most Manitobans define "absenteeism" is whether or not students are not physically present in the school or classroom. However, many of those interviewed, including parents and students, distinguished between "positive" (or "sanctioned") forms of absenteeism, such as a student missing class to participate in sports, field trips or other extracurricular activities, and "negative" ("non-sanctioned") forms of absenteeism where a student is simply absent from school. One inner-city community member made this distinction clear:

> *I'd say there are two types [of absenteeism]. My son is a competitive swimmer so he's absent from school but the teachers know about it and his absenteeism is considered necessary. One [type of absenteeism] is sanctioned, and the other is not. We took our kids to Europe for two months and that wasn't considered absent. I think we should focus on the kids who come for a few days and aren't there for a day or two. It's kind of like people at work abusing their sick days and that type of thing.*

Some educators, parents and students noted that even if a student is absent for an extended period, this does not mean that a student is not learning. One educator pointed out that when parents in northern Manitoba take their children out on trap lines, the student is still learning even if they are not physically in the classroom for an extended period. A high school principal reported that he is seeing an increasingly number of families taking their children on holidays during school periods, however he did not view this as a problem when the parents inform the school and ensure that their children are doing the required course work (which he reported is being done in "90%" of cases).

3.3   Measuring Enrolments in Manitoba

3.3.1   Student Enrolments in Manitoba

The following table (Table 1) provides a breakdown of how students are distributed within the provincial school system, with the vast majority of all students (84.9%) enrolled in public schools. Worth noting is that close to eight percent (7.9%) of students are enrolled in schools operated under federal jurisdiction in First Nations communities.

Table 1: 2007/08 Enrolments According to School Types in Manitoba					
Public	Funded Independent	Non-Funded Independent	Home Schooling	Band	Total
181,446	13,188	975	1,235	16,834	213,678

Source: Based on MECY, "A Statistical Profile of Education in Manitoba September 2003 to June 2008," Table 6.

3.3.2   Discrepancies between Aggregate Population Data and School Enrolments

There currently exists a need to account for discrepancies between population data for residents of Manitoba who are aged five through eighteen, and population figures that are reported in provincial enrolment figures, including home schooling, independent schools, and First Nations schools.

Figure 1, on the following page, shows the discrepancies between Manitoba Health population data for children aged 5 to 18 and enrolment figures for recent years. For example, Manitoba Health reported that 227,422 individuals aged 5 to 18 resided in Manitoba during the 2007-08 year, while Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, reported a total of 224,648 students being enrolled during this same year.[3] A discrepancy between the two population counts totals 2,774 for the 2007/08 year.

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[3] This includes province-wide enrolment figures plus children who would be in the province and receiving educational services through "non-eligible classrooms" (such as through such organizations and agencies as the Manitoba Youth Centre).
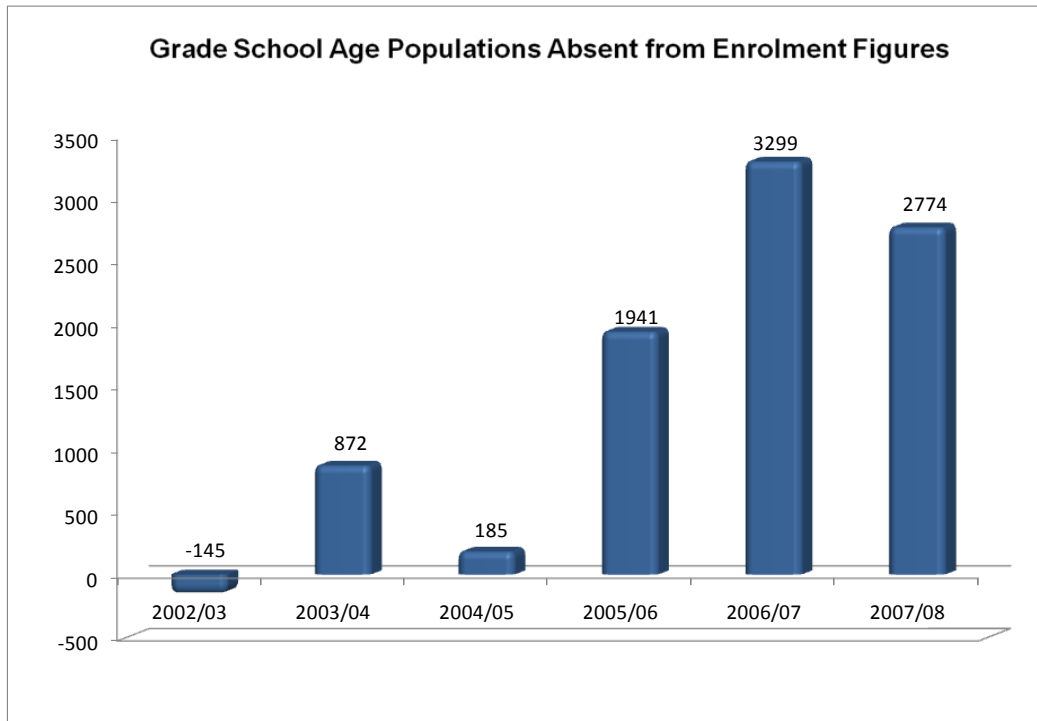
Grade School Age Populations Absent from Enrolment Figures

Figure 1: Grade School Populations Differences with MECY Enrolment Figures.
Source: Calculated from Manitoba Health population figures and MECY enrolment figures[4]

Discrepancies between the two populations could be due to numerous causes, some of which would be simple "measurement error" arising from differences which months are included for each year in which the populations are measured. Manitoba Health population figures are measured from June 1, to June 1 for each year, while Manitoba school enrolment figures are reported for the end of September for each year. However, over a longer period of time, these differences in reference points should counter-balance each other, unless the province is in the midst of an ongoing population growth for school age children which would signify that figures based on June to June periods would always be larger than those figures based on September to September measures. As long as population growth in the specific age grouping is on an incline, it would be expected that enrolment figures would lag slightly behind health population figures.

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[4] The Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth has data for student enrolments for the 2008-09 school year. However, these figures are not included in this report as data from the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs for First Nations students and population health data are not yet available; thus, comparisons cannot be made for the most recent school year.

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Aside from measurement-related issues, there may be other causes for the discrepancies. These might include:

- Population mobility could be one factor, by which young people are captured in population-related research but are not enrolled in a Manitoba school, or may be counted in the June population but is outside the province in September.

- Chronic transiency may cause students to miss enrolling in September.

- Students who have dropped out of school prior to age 18 would be counted in the population profiles, but not enrolment figures.

- Long term absentees for whatever reason, including health reasons or having daytime employment, would reduce enrolment figures but not population figures.

- Students who have suspended their studies for a year, such as young mothers, would be counted in the population data but not as enrolled students.

- While there currently exists a consistently applied province-wide system for capturing student enrolments, inconsistencies might be arising within schools that fall under federal jurisdiction within First Nations communities.

- Kindergarten is not compulsory in Manitoba, and students are not required to attend school until they are seven years old.

Due to mobility issues and a recognition that student tracking data has neither been properly standardized not gathered in a manner that national data can be assessed as it pertains to different jurisdictions, the Canadian Education Statistics Council (CESC) which is a partnership between the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and Statistics Canada, is currently in the process of assessing the feasibility for designing a strategy by which students can be tracked using a "unique identifier" as they move into the education system anywhere in Canada and as they move from K to 12, and even beyond into post-secondary training.[5]

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[5] CESC, "The Use of Student-Level Data to Provide Information on Student Pathways and Mobility, RFP," October 7, 2008, p. 1. See also <http://www.cesc.ca/pceraE.html> accessed March 28, 2009.

One concern raised by a number of stakeholders including one First Nations superintendent, is that enrolment data is only collected once a year, so a student who is in class at the end of September will be counted as part of a school's enrolled population, although he or she may shortly drift out of the school system, or even change his or her community of residence. Furthermore, some teachers or schools might work to maintain their population numbers until the beginning of October and then allow students who are perceived to be a problem to drift out of their school or the school system itself. One possible solution to such concerns would be to maintain enrolment figures for both September and January of each year. As one stakeholder asserted:

> *It would help if there was more than one "count" day. Have it maybe three or four times a year or once a month. There needs to be more encouragement by the teachers, principal or school to help the child stay in school. Because there is only one count day, schools don't encourage kids to show up because they've already got their funding for that year. So we need to have more count days so that schools are more accountable.*

3.4   Prevalence of Absenteeism in Manitoba

Community members, parents and other stakeholders identified several things in the province's socioeconomic environment that puts students in specific population groups at greater risk of being absent from school for extended periods of time, or indefinitely. At the same time, most representatives of friendship centres and educational/youth outreach organizations reported their belief that school absenteeism is a serious problem in their local area and across the province generally.

3.4.1   Low Income and Absenteeism

The overarching issue identified by many respondents across the different population groups interviewed is systemic poverty, especially for vulnerable populations such as the children of single parents, recent immigrants and Aboriginal Manitobans. As one social agency stakeholder summarized:

> *School attendance and completion [rates] have improved over the [time] I have been involved … but I would estimate that 30 to 35 percent of economically disadvantaged students tend to not graduate from high school. The wider community needs to see that dropping out of school is not an event, but the end result of a long process where children have disengaged from school because of various factors building and compounding over time. Looking at future demographics, the future success of Winnipeg and Manitoba is inextricably linked to the success of Aboriginal and Newcomer (ie. immigrant) students.*

Other factors -- many of which tie into poverty and also may not be exclusive to Manitoba – include: poor housing conditions and homelessness; family transience; gang activity; drug and alcohol abuse; and cultural and language barriers for Aboriginal students and recent immigrants.

These perspectives from Manitobans appear to be consistent with research studies concerning absenteeism in other parts of North America.   In Kimberly Knesting's article regarding factors involving grade school absenteeism and dropouts for the *Encyclopedia of School Psychology*, the following elements are described as being connected to student drop-out rates:

> *Research shows that dropouts more often come from low-income families, are members of ethnic minorities, and receive less educational support at home....They have more discipline problems as measured by higher suspension rates, more absenteeism, and more tardiness. Students who fail to graduate also feel less generally involved in school and participate less in extracurricular activities....Dropouts also are more likely to work outside of school and to report enjoying work more than school.... (Schools) themselves play a role in a student's decision to either drop out or persist... (and) the school environment also has a significant influence. For students who are at risk for dropping out, school is often perceived as an unwelcoming place.*[6]

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[6] Kimberly Knesting, "Dropouts," in Steven Lee, ed.,"Dropouts", *Encyclopedia of School Psychology.* Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005 pp 174.

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A recent study produced by Marni Brownell, *et al.,* draws a link between low incomes and school absenteeism in Manitoba. In it they define "high risk" school children along three dimensions: "those whose family experienced poverty, or who grew up with teen mothers, or who had contact with the child welfare system."[7] Figure 2 (on the next page) shows the prevalence of the three risk factors that have been identified by the researchers, and the extent to which they overlap among 18-year-old Winnipeg residents who were born in Manitoba. The subsequent chart (Figure 3), which is also taken from this study, shows how these risk factors are prevalent among those who do not complete their high school studies.

Overlap of Three Risk Factors for Winnipeg Children
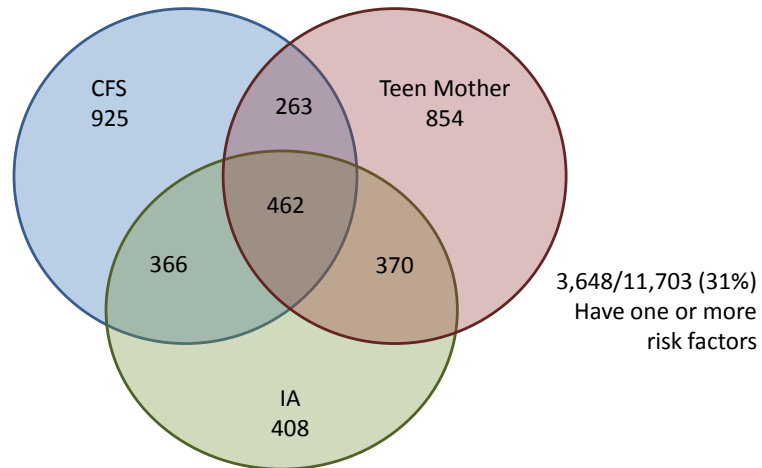
CFS = in care or receiving services from Child and Family Services
IA=family receipt of Income Assistance

Figure 2: Based on Manitoba Centre for Health Policy data, as cited in Brownell, et al, 2007

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[7] "Equal Opportunity for All? High School Completion Rates for High Risk Youths," *MASS Journal*, Fall, 2007, p. 14.

Percent of Winnipeg Youth Who Failed to Graduate Within Six Years of Entering Grade 9, by Risk Factors
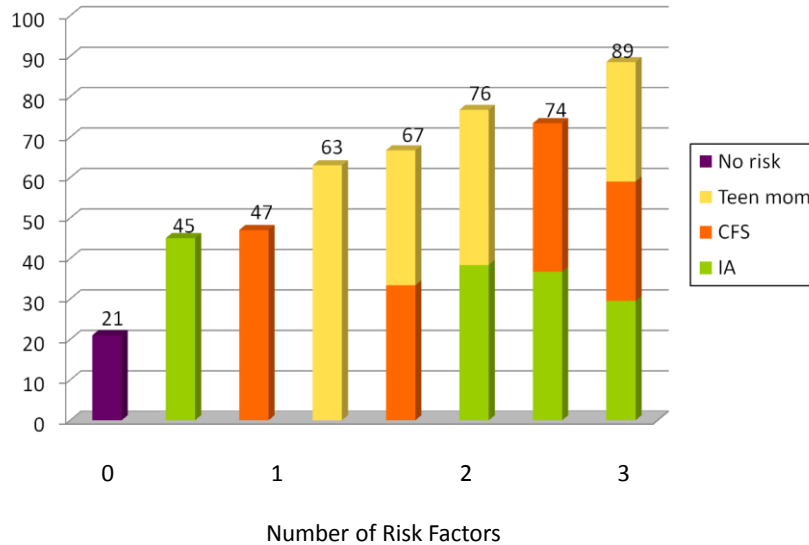
Figure 3: Based on Manitoba Centre for Health Policy data, as cited in Brownell, et al., 2007

As shown in Figure 3, close to 90 percent of those with all three risk factors present in their life had not completed their high school studies, while only 20 percent of those without any of the three risk factors did not complete their degree. The Figure 3 also shows how each of these factors interacts with the incidence of non-completion when blended with one of the other factors.

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In another study about Manitoba students, prepared by Noralou Roos, *et al*., the data results reveal that being on social assistance in Manitoba is a strong predictor of provincial exam failures. Their study, published under the title, "The Complete Story: A Population-Based Perspective on School Performance and Educational Testing,"[8] uses province-wide data regarding the Grade 12 Language Arts Test, which is a mandatory exam for all students. They found that:

> *[T]he poorest neighbourhood students were only one third as likely to pass their language arts test as the wealthiest neighbourhood students. Youths in families receiving social assistance face even harsher challenges....Focusing on the entire cohort (those who wrote and did not write due to absence or having dropped out), for youths in families receiving assistance the odds of passing the language arts test at the age appropriate time were 85 per cent lower than the odds for youths in families not receiving assistance, even after controlling for the other factors (sex, mean household income in neighbourhood of residence, and mother's age at the birth of the child).[9]*

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[8] "The Complete Story: A Population-Based Perspective on School Performance and Educational Testing," *Canadian Journal of Education*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2006.

[9] *Ibid., pp. 696-697. See also, by the same authors,* "Is the Class Half Empty? A Population-Based Perspective on Socioeconomic Status and Educational Outcomes," *IRPP Choices*, vol. 12, no. 5, October, 2006.

Section 3.0 - Key Findings:

The term "attendance" as it is used by those who are involved in the education system, including teachers, parents and students, pertains to whether or not the student is physically present in the classroom or school during a regular school day.

There are discrepancies with regard to population data and school enrolment data as they pertain to Manitobans who are aged five through eighteen.

The secondary research shows that close to 90 percent of those students in Winnipeg who have three identifiable risk factors in their lives (that is, having a teen mother, having contact with Child and Family Services, and residing in a household that has relied on income assistance) do not complete the requirements for a high school degree.

Section 3.0 – Recommendations arising from the findings:

MECY should explore how it might better track enrolments and attendance across the province with regard to all school age children in the province, and consider having enrolment figures collected at least twice a year.

With regard to measuring enrolment figures, dropouts, and absenteeism, MECY should work with the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics to explore ways to address discrepancies that currently exist between enrolment data and other population estimates for school age children.

The Province should continue to collaborate with the Council of Education Ministers, Canada (CMEC) and the Canadian Education Statistics Council (CESC) in their efforts to investigate the best means by which students can be "tracked" as they move across provincial and school division jurisdictions, and as they advance through the school system.

MECY should work in partnership with other departments in light of a key finding arising from the secondary research concerning children who are at risk and residing in low income circumstances.

4.0   STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ABSENTEEISM

Students are in agreement with other stakeholders who participated in this study that the concept of "attendance" pertains to being physically present in class. This section explores their perspectives on factors relating to school absenteeism, based either their own experiences, or those of other family members or students in their school. The students who provided their views on this subject ranged from Grade 9 to Grade 12 students.

4.1   Views on Critical Number of Absences

Students who participated in roundtable discussions offered varying perspectives regarding the number of unsanctioned absences that a student can undergo with a specific course before it will start to affect a student's grade. Some students felt that even missing one day can be critical, especially if a student misses a class in a course that is more challenging than others or in which an assignment is due. "Any day you miss, you miss something," was how one student described it. Another noted that missing a day at a school that uses the "double semester" system is problematic, as a student who is away for one day misses the equivalent of two days in a single semester program. Most students, however, said that prolonged absences of between three to five days will begin to affect a student's marks.

When asked if they felt that missing school would hurt their chances of completing their grade year, many students were inclined to disagree, noting that students can make up for absences by completing school work on the weekends. Some noted that repeated absences are inevitable if students are engaged in employment, especially for those who support themselves. "When you're fending for yourself, school becomes a bit less important," one student said. However, students noted that some schools can hold students back in their grades if they reach a specific number of absences.

4.2 Student Perspectives: Reasons for Student Absences

Students identified several reasons for why they or their peers miss classes. These fell into a number of general categories which are discussed below.

4.2.1 Personal Circumstances

The general and multi-dimensional concept of "stress" was cited by many students as leading to school attendance problems. As one student put it, students who have "too many things going on" will no longer attend class. For some, this stress is brought on by jobs outside school – especially when these jobs are the only means students have to support themselves financially. As one student said: "When you get kicked out of your house, you have to go work to live. You're becoming the man or woman of the house. You have to deal with it." Student stress can also be caused by confrontation with parents or teachers over academic performance.

According to one report prepared for Statistics Canada, when local employment opportunities increase, or when families need the income that is provided by student employment, teenage students can become vulnerable to employment- related absenteeism or become vulnerable to dropping out of school. [10] This view was supported by students who attended the roundtable discussions, especially by students attending schools in low income areas of Winnipeg. Students who work in part-time or full-time jobs – especially those who work to support themselves – are often likely to miss class. Generally speaking, students reported that this pertains to working outside of school hours, but the link occurs between being too tired or needing a break and being absent from school. This signals a need to further explore the link between employment, school absenteeism, and drop-out rates in Manitoba.

Childcare issues are a cause for some high school students to miss classes. This includes students who are parents of young children or a new baby as well as students who are required to stay home to take care of siblings. In an effort to address this issue, a number of schools in Manitoba have instituted childcare support programs for such students. However, there appears to be a shortage in programming in some areas.

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[10] Tracey Bushnik, "Learning, Earning and Leaving: The Relationship Between Working While in High School and Dropping Out," Research Paper, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics (CES), 2003.

Living in a home which is dysfunctional can also cause problems for students with regard to attending school. Some children have been able to overcome these problems, while others have not. Students who face personal crises arising from their home life, such as abuse, would tend to have difficulty dealing with school-related priorities.

Some students reported bullying as a factor that might cause students to be absent. That is, students may avoid school in order to avoid being bullied by other students. Some schools are also reported to have gang-related issues which, in turn, make for a problematic environment for some students.

4.2.2   Behavioural

Issues related to personal behaviour, such as students taking drugs, drinking or staying up late playing video games, fall into this category. "Drugs" was one of the most commonly identified causes of student absenteeism. Drugs are reported to play a role in causing school absenteeism for some students in a number of ways:

- Students skip classes because they have gotten "high" either by themselves or with friends during the daytime.
- Some students are suspended due to being involved in taking drugs.
- Students skip classes because they fear that a teacher will discern that they are high. This can occur by their behaviour but more often it is because the student smells of the drug.
- In general students did not report daytime drinking as a prevalent problem for most students, however, it was reported that a few students might have daytime drinking problems.
- One way that alcohol might be an absenteeism-related factor is that many students report having drunk too much the night before a school day, and are hung over the next day. It is possible that this problem masquerades as an illness among affected students.

Although not specifically mentioned in the stakeholder interviews, one response to the prevalence of school-averse behaviours in some school communities has been through the use of School Resource Officers (SROs). They serve as an in-school presence for law-enforcement as well as an opportunity for building a sense of school safety and mentorship. Each SRO is assigned to a specific high school as well as to those schools that feed into the high school from the junior and elementary grades. In Winnipeg, the North End School Resource Officer Partnership Initiative involves a total of fourteen schools.[11] At the same time, in Brandon there are two SROs among the Brandon Police Force that perform this task.[12]

Many students report that school absenteeism arises simply because students would simply prefer to do something else. This includes deciding to skip class to go shopping or to spend time with friends.

Students widely reported that peer pressure plays a significant role in missing classes, as students are encouraged to cut class by their friends.

Being late for class, regardless of whether or not this is the morning or the afternoon, has an impact on an entire half day, or full day of classes. Many students reported that by missing their morning bus, or being late due to being at a restaurant for lunch, can cause them to be late, and as such will take the full half day off. In other words, missing the first class in the day or the afternoon makes many students feel that it is not worth attending subsequent classes.

A significant problem that was identified by many students was that students who sleep in will tend to miss a half day or even a full day of classes. This can be caused by being up too late the night before, with video games often cited as the cause, or simply wanting to have more sleep. (The role that parents can play in breaking this cycle is discussed below under "authority figures").

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[11] <http://www.wsd1.org/stjohns/student_resource_officers.htm> accessed April 14, 2009.

[12] <http://www.city.brandon.mb.ca/main.nsf/Pages+By+ID/1268> accessed April 14, 2009.

Many students noted that they recognize that having motivation – or more precisely, a lack of motivation – towards getting a good education is a major factor affecting whether students attend or miss school. Motivation can be generated by parents, siblings, or teachers. However, some students also recognize that this comes from within the students themselves.

4.2.3   Environmental / Physical

Some students reported that extremely cold weather or snow might prompt students to miss school. Furthermore, among those who need to be transported to their schools, especially in rural areas, poor service or weather conditions can be problematic. Among those in low income families with small children, it was reported that poor weather can cause some students to stay at home in place of trying to transport children in strollers through difficult snowbound areas.

Students who receive rides to school are perceived to have higher attendance rates. Basic transportation was cited as a factor for some students, especially during cold weather days. Some communities, including some First Nations communities, appear to have reliability-related challenges with the systems they use.

4.2.4   The Role Played by Authority Figures

Three major groups of authority figures are cited as playing a role with regard to absenteeism by students: parents, teachers, and principals/vice principals.

Parents or Guardians

While students report conflicts with authority figures, most students cited the positive role needed for parents to be involved with awakening their children in the morning and ensuring that they are getting out of the home and on their way to school. Students report that their absenteeism can occur simply because they might not be pushed to attend in the morning, and they can slip into a habit of sleeping in and either missing their school transportation and/or their first morning classes. Furthermore, the importance that a parent places on education influences the student's perspective on schooling.

In order to illustrate the importance that parents can play, the words and expressions used by Winnipeg area students (Metro School Division) on the subject of what influences their school attendance were uploaded into a qualitative program that provides content analysis by converting text into a graphical representation. Larger words signify that they have been used more extensively by the students compared to the smaller words. By producing a graphical depiction of the words and expressions of students, the reader can discern the importance of specific terms compared to others. The results in Figure 4 reveal that the students see the role for parents as being very important, and recognize the importance of giving "support", being supportive, and having parents and teachers "listening" to the learning-related needs of students.[13]
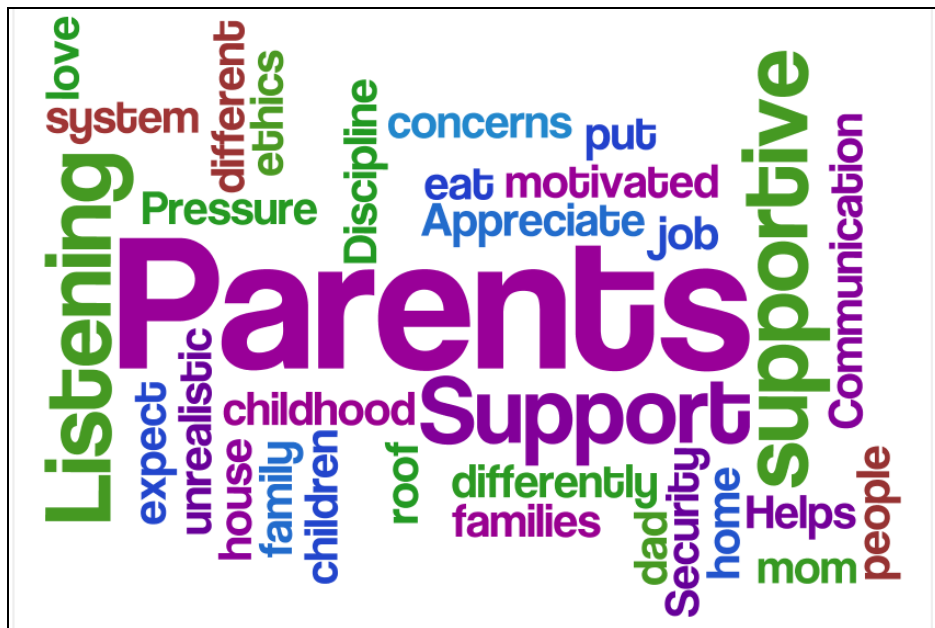

Figure 4: "Wordle" Chart, Based on Metro School Division Student Discussions

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[13] See <http://www.wordle.net/gallery/wrdl/586776/Family_and_school> accessed March 29, 2009.

Teachers

Not surprisingly, students reported that a factor in skipping class is not getting along with a particular teacher or teachers in general, either due to personality conflicts or because they do not agree with the way the teachers instruct students (such as using outdated materials or being unable to engage the student's interest). Sometimes this conflict spills over into the home if parents are notified of absences by teachers.

While teachers can play a negative role, most students report that teachers they perceive to be high quality educators affect their willingness to attend classes. If the subject area is interesting and/or the teacher is putting forward the material in a manner that engages the student, then students are more interested in attending classes.

Principals and Vice-Principals

Many students reported being strongly affected by what principals or vice-principals in their schools are doing. Perhaps because students who have high absenteeism rates tend to be involved directly in discipline-related discussions with their principal or vice-principal, these individuals play a dual role with regard to absenteeism:

- They provide leadership for the school with regard to policies and activities that can promote attendance rates, which then filter into the classroom and the lives of students.
- They become directly involved in communicating with the student and parent(s) concerning problems relating to poor attendance issues.

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Section 4.0 - Key Findings:

Many students underplay the significance of missing the occasional class. Furthermore, because "lateness" generates an absenteeism report, students who find themselves late for a class – due to an event such as missing a bus or being late upon returning from lunch – will decide to be absent for subsequent classes that day.

Students recognize the critically important role played by their parents with regard to promoting better attendance. This includes what might appear as small things such as waking their children in the morning, or listening to their concerns and being supportive.

Lifestyle-related choices can negatively influence a student's engagement in learning, and thereby affect school attendance and drop-out rates. Students need to be encouraged to make informed decisions about these choices, including those pertaining to drugs and alcohol.

Some school divisions have employed School Resource Officers (SROs) and used external organizations such as the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) to promote student choices relating to health and school safety.

In some communities transportation-related issues can inhibit school attendance. This includes access to reliable transportation, especially among children whose parent(s) are unable to drive students to their schools.

Childcare issues are a cause for some high school students to miss classes. This includes students who are parents of young children or a new baby as well as students who are required to stay home to take care of siblings. Some schools seek to address this issue by instituting childcare support programs for both student offspring and siblings.

Students recognize that principals and vice-principals play an important role in the personal lives of students who have attendance-related problems. This is due to the relatively high level of interaction that occurs between administrators and students when such issues arise.

Section 4.0 – Recommendations arising from the findings:

In order to prevent students from developing absentee-related habits, schools in partnership with families should further develop ways to inform students of the ramifications of missing classes, stressing that one skipped class can be too many.

Students need to be reminded about how lifestyle-related choices, including the use of drugs and alcohol as well as their after-effects, can negatively affect school attendance and completion rates.

MECY should explore how school-related childcare programs are provided across the Province, and support these programs where needs are warranted

MECY should seek input from principals and vice-principals when developing new attendance-related strategies.

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5.0   PERSPECTIVES REGARDING FAMILY/HOME

5.1   *Valuing Education*

Many stakeholders, including parents, students and educators said that one of the most influential factors for promoting school attendance is for parents and students alike to value education. The expressed view was that if parents do not place a value on going to school and do not associate negative consequences with repeated absenteeism, then educators cannot do much to fix the problem. Such values tend to be passed from generation to generation, and if parents have experienced poor personal experiences in their own schooling, such as having been put through the residential school system (or having a parent who had undergone the experience) or being brought up in another society where schooling was less important than making ends meet, attitudes about education and the importance of attending class can easily be transmitted to the child.

As one educator said:

> *We work with parents about how valuable it is for children to be present to learn. Parents always want to do what's best for their children. Sometimes they believe it's best for their children to stay home when it's minus-50 C outside. We have to educate parents to believe that education is important no matter what.*

Other values related to school attendance that can be instilled in the home is self-discipline, having a strong work ethic and being committed to academic excellence. As well, many respondents said it is important for parents to "take ownership" of their child's education by communicating with their child's teacher and actively working towards successful learning outcomes. As one community stakeholder noted:

> *It's important that the family is included in decision making. What's happening now is that the school system is depersonalized. If kids don't fit in the school system, the school system won't work for them. They should be meeting in the middle.*

Students and some community stakeholders noted that parents need to be more supportive and encouraging towards their children. As well, they have to listen to their child, as "there's a reason why he or she is skipping," as one individual said. Others said families have to demonstrate "accountability" for their children's attendance habits, especially by establishing boundaries on their activities including structured sleeping, entertainment, and eating patterns which promote learning.

5.2 Communications

In their study of school absenteeism and dropout rates across 42 South Carolina schools, Gary Gottfredson and Denise Gottfredson revealed a statistically significant correlation between student outcomes and the extent to which parents are involved in the schools in which their children are enrolled.[14] In the case of Manitoba, many parents and educators expressed the continuing need to build connections between parents/guardians and the schools in which their children are enrolled. Currently most schools have a system by which parents are notified if a student is absent. However, it was strongly expressed in most of the roundtable discussions that absenteeism is greatly reduced among families in which the parents are in regular communication with their children's schools.

Some parents expressed the view that their children's schools could be doing a better job in communicating with them about attendance issues. In many cases the school's efforts are thwarted due to children being able to intercept calls or letters from the school when they pertain to school attendance issues.

Several respondents stressed that families simply must take more responsibility for ensuring that their children attend school. For many respondents, this means having more opportunities for parents to communicate with educators about their children's education. "I want to know which teachers are the issue, what my child is doing, etc. Communication would be a huge improvement," one parent said. Some of the ideas offered include more frequent meetings and higher levels of engagement between parents and educators. One principal summed up what many others said:

> *There should be more home-school communication. If you are looking at high schools, you have to look at why they are absent. Is it because they have been pushed into a class they don't want to take? Can they get to school because of Mom and Dad? Communication has to be taking place by schools and families to find out what the problem is and come to a solution. One solution is not going to fix everyone's needs. They might need a different bus route to get to school, or maybe some extra tutoring so they don't feel totally dejected in classroom situations.*

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[14] Other identified variables included safety, morale, resources, and classroom orderliness. Gary Gottfredson and Denise Gottfredson, "School Climate, Academic Performance, Attendance, and Dropouts," Washington, DC : U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Educational Resources Information Center, 1989.

Added another principal:

> *You have to have the parent/guardian involved. They have to be willing to work with the school and the kids. They have to be supportive. Let us into their life. Let us know what their challenges are. Back us [educators] up or cut their kids some slack. They should be willing to see that it's not just about attendance. It could be about their child being interested and their passion. Are they engaged? We have to be consistent and calling them on it versus throwing the child out of school.*

Some community spokespersons, parents and educators are concerned that the children of parents who are not in communication with the school are the ones most prone to having absenteeism problems. One stakeholder remarked "I see the same small group of parents at each of the meetings."   Socioeconomic factors (such as poverty) or negative experiences with school, including residential schools for Aboriginal parents, may prevent constructive engagement with parents. However, as one stakeholder said:

> *Parents and schools need to come to see the school as places of hope. They often see schools as the enemy. The thinking has to change from all sides. Schools need to draw parents into the schools. The parent usually didn't have any positive experiences when they were going to school and that message has been conveyed to their child. They need to have programs for parents that kind of break down the walls and that allows them to see the school as a safe and helpful place.*

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5.3   Existing Supports For/Within Families

Stakeholders identified a number of family-related components that can influence attendance-related behaviours, in addition to parents. These include family members themselves (parents, grandparents, older siblings, aunts, and other extended family members), parent advisory councils that might be involved in the school system, and in some cases, "faith communities". School employees, including teachers, counsellors and other education specialists (such speech pathologists, psychologists, etc.) sometimes work with families to resolve student issues.

Specific positions, such as community workers and Aboriginal academic achievement workers, are also in place in some school divisions to help support students and families who might face specific challenges that are best addressed in a culturally attuned manner. Some friendship centres and service organizations also have other specialists who work with families who have children deemed to be "at risk", such as social workers, addictions counsellors, and family life counsellors.

Section 5 - Key Findings:

Varying levels of commitment among parents to education and school attendance can be influenced by their own upbringing, personal experiences, and situational factors, such as challenges relating to mobility and low income.

Some parents believe that their children's schools could do a better job communicating with them about attendance issues. In many cases, the school's efforts are thwarted due to children being able to intercept calls or letters from the school when they pertain to attendance issues.

Schools should be made to be more inviting. Among the different stakeholders, including parents, children, and teachers, there is agreement that raising comfort levels in the schools makes it easier for children to have higher attendance rates.

While many parents appear engaged with educators at their children's schools, there appears to be a large number of parents who fall outside the collaborative orbit of educators.

Section 5 – Recommendations arising from the findings:

MECY should explore ways by which school attendance can be promoted more strongly. Parents need to be informed that daily school attendance is mandatory (not optional) and very important for all children. Furthermore, parents should be informed that absenteeism leads to incomplete grades and dropping out of school, and that schooling is important for personal development and later employment.

MECY should further develop a strategy by which schools work with parents, students, and communities to ensure that parents who otherwise would not be engaged in their children's schooling will feel welcome to visit the schools of their children and collaborate with teachers on issues pertaining to their children's development. This could include the promotion of family or community events held in the school facilities in order to increase the comfort levels of parents who would otherwise not visit a school.

MECY should develop ways by which parents, schools and communities could work together to identify ways to increase and enhance communications with parents who are marginalized and/or reside in low income households. Of particular concern are those whose children are deemed to be at risk.

6.0   ATTENDANCE AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Schools play a central role in helping to reduce school absenteeism and drop-out rates, and have in place a number of strategies that can be categorized as part of "school-based approaches" to promoting attendance rates.[15]

6.1   Tracking Attendance & Notification Systems

6.1.1   Measuring Attendance

Most of the educators surveyed said that their schools use database software programs such as Mayette, Maplewood, Travalac or CIMS to keep track of their students, with a couple of educators noting that they also have teachers take attendance using paper copies. Some outside agencies that provide after-school programs also reported having their own attendance monitoring systems.

6.1.2   Notification Systems Used for Absentees

Some schools supplement their database systems with a program called Cynervoice, which is an automated program that sends parents a message to let them know that their child has been absent from class without an accepted reason. One principal whose school uses Cynervoice described the program and the procedures it triggers after repeated absences:

> *Attendance is taken in each class before 4 p.m. It is entered online by the teacher before 4 p.m. Each day at 4:30 Cynervoice kicks in and phones or emails the parent. There is instant notification to the home that the child is not in school for that day. The teachers will phone home after three absences. At the ninth absence, we call a meeting with the administrative staff, parents and child to see what's going on and what we can do to help the child get to school.*

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[15] See Gary Natriello, "Dropouts, School," *Encyclopedia of Education*, Volume 2, 2nd Ed., James W. Guthrie, New York: Macmillan Reference, 2002, pp. 599-602.

In addition to tracking student absences, these software programs also collect information such as how often a student is late, how often a student is sick as well as suspensions and expulsions. Some schools also collect more detailed information on students, including details of behavioural issues (skipping class or "hall wandering," smoking, drug use) that may be related to school attendance. Some of this information is also collected along with academic information that is used to track completion rates, graduation rates, etc. As well, a couple of schools continue to use truancy officers to monitor student attendance and work with families to ensure students get to school.

When not using an automated notification system to reach parents or guardians, schools often rely on their own human resources to contact the household. However, as one Vice Principal reported that this has tied up a lot of her administrative resources and required the use of two secretaries. Parents and some students report that telephone calls or letters are often intercepted by the absent student, or even by a sibling, who might not want the parent to be notified. One educator noted that their school is using email more often to notify parents.

> *We have a process for attendance letters to go out regularly – [it is] labour intensive and cumbersome. This year both staff and admin are using e-mail as a vehicle more often. [E-mail] can't be deleted like phone messages can. We have had more parents in sooner to help plan with their son/daughter. It seems friendlier and has had about the same success rate*

Some principals reported that the Cynervoice program has been a very effective way for notifying parents about student absenteeism. As one principal said, it is an "excellent deterrent" against students skipping school. For many stakeholders, including some parents, however, concerns were raised that programs that simply collect data on school attendance and warn parents of absenteeism are ineffective when more difficult factors preventing attendance are present. As one stakeholder said:

> *The data doesn't [sic] improve it at all. That's not the reason that students don't go to school. You have to go deeper than just looking at the data to figure out why a child is not going to school. It has more to do with poverty, having no food, racism, etc.*

Parents and students report that the notifications can be intercepted by the absentee student or his/her siblings. Others highlighted the earlier distinction between attendance and engagement, with some noting that data of this type does not track whether students are actually engaging with their learning environment even if they are present in the classroom.

In order to be effective, a school's notification system needs to be considered as just one component of an attendance-related program. Dialogue, one educator said, is especially important when cultural or language barriers are present:

> *We have families that are unfamiliar with the Canadian system so sometimes, they interpret something a different way because of the language barrier. For example, the parent gets the automated call if the kid misses a day. The kid interprets that differently and tells their parent "I thought that day was a day off" or something like that. We then intervene with phone and email. We've found that by bringing in the family and clarifying things helps, just by letting them know that "on this day, we do this" or "your child needs to be in school every day from this to this time." It works because the parent knows what to expect as they are still learning about the process as well. We guide them through the process, what to expect, how the school system works.*

6.2   Existing Attendance Policies

School principals and others who are directly involved in the education system were asked to identify currently existing attendance policies as they apply to schools across all of Manitoba's school divisions. For the most part, while these individuals agreed that existing policies are fundamentally based on provincial laws which require students under 16 to attend school, most see that attendance related policies that fall under this law are generally flexible, both at the division level and according to the individual circumstances confronted by educators when dealing with students who miss class. As one principal explained:

> *[The absenteeism policy] is 16 absences and then you can't attend. But there are times that students can't come to school because they are working or babysitting or caring for a sibling. We give exceptions to those students. We want to recognize that this is something they need to do so we use the policy as a guideline because we want them to be successful. But it depends on the school. In one school ... "sixteen absences and you're out" is the be-all and end-all and I just don't think that's right.*

The majority of those interviewed felt that the existing attendance policies are working well. However, some individuals – especially from areas where the absenteeism and/or dropout rates are high – said that they require improvement. One of the ideas offered to improve attendance policies included having more culturally sensitive truancy officers. Noted one executive stakeholder: "[Sending] two white officers will not help."

Other educators noted that truancy officers and others who monitor student attendance require more resources, while others reported that resources and partnerships between the school and community agencies must go beyond focusing on mechanisms that simply monitor student attendance. As well, several stakeholders said that whatever solutions come about must involve parents and other community members in a meaningful way. In the words of another stakeholder:

> *School is really part of the community. Schools have to make sure they are*
> *part of the community by engaging with the parent and [local] community...*

6.2.1   Engagement & Attendance

There appears to be agreement that in some cases students may be absent, but still engaged in learning. Some educators noted that even if a student is absent for an extended period, this does not mean that a student is not learning. One individual pointed out that when parents in northern Manitoba take their children out on trap lines, the student is still learning even if they are not physically in the classroom for an extended period. Indeed, some schools have developed strategies to ensure that learning continues during a student's prolonged absence. Explained one educator:

> *We have started to look at things differently here. Instead of looking at*
> *[attendance] as having them in the building, we've looked at keeping a link*
> *with the child when they are not in the school and providing them with*
> *programs so that they can continue learning. We've had a great deal of*
> *success with this.*

Many teachers reported the importance of having a one-to-one connection with students. That is, a student who is at risk may attend school more frequently if there is a person that he or she trusts in the school system. This may be a specific teacher, a career counsellor, a front office receptionist, or a custodial staff person. As one teacher noted, the value of active participation in education extends to students as well:

> *You really have to develop a sense of ownership with the students themselves. They have to feel a part of the whole school environment. They have to feel that they like the school and are wanted.*

Some schools have established programs to nurture this connection by identifying specific students for one-on-one contact with a specific educator or support person. However, the system works only to the extent to which staff are interested in seeing the program succeed, and that there is sufficient time among the staff to operationalize the system.

Some schools have started specific programs to promote attendance by ensuring students feel that they are invited to learn in a welcoming and supportive environment. One example of such efforts is the "Circles of Care", which one government department stakeholder noted has "brought in resources to work with the family and re-engage the young person." Other programs some schools offer, or that are offered in conjunction with community organizations, include breakfast programs, after-school programs, childcare programs and career mentoring programs. These were identified as important ways in which some schools mitigate the possibility of extended student absenteeism.

6.2.2   Connecting to Students

A number of parents and educators noted that part of the process for promoting attendance is for teachers and schools to change the curriculum to make it more "relevant" and "interesting" to students at risk of absenteeism, or using "creative teaching techniques" to hold students' interest. Related to this was a suggestion that schools offer more opportunities for students to pick up credit for activities done outside the classroom, offer a wider selection of courses and encourage participation in extracurricular activities. One individual recommended that educators provide more rewards to students for good attendance. Above all, schools "must provide an engaging and safe learning environment so students want to be at school," one service organization representative said.

With regard to changing the curricula, this falls into two general action-related categories:

- The school materials need to be sufficiently interesting, and prepared to suit the current ways by which young people think about the world.

- Schools should consider including "applied learning" techniques that might include vocational skills training or other topics that students might find more relevant to their interests.

As one educator remarked, he and his staff have...

> *...changed how we look at attendance. We look at not just their physical presence in the school, but their engagement in the program even for those that are not in school.... We are starting to see that this is very important. Assessment doesn't have to be around tests that happen in the classroom only. We have seen evidence that these [alternative] kinds of programs have improved graduation rates, especially among Aboriginal kids. I would argue that it's helped keep them connected with the school a great deal.*

A number of educators and others recommended that schools hire more instructors and/or support staff, such as teaching assistants and tutors, in order to lower student-teacher ratios in classrooms and ensure that children's learning needs are being met. Another idea offered by one individual was for schools to establish "catch up classes" during school hours or after-school "homework clubs" that allow students who have missed class to complete schoolwork.

Students themselves recommended a number of timetable changes within the schools, including having longer breaks between classes. "Three minute breaks are ridiculous," said one student, noting that students repeatedly recorded as "late" ended up being considered absent – or students who are late will choose not to attend the class. Another suggestion was that students should be allowed to eat in class, thus eliminating the need to take meal breaks between classes. Two other suggestions included starting classes later in the morning and extending the lunch break so that students have more time to return to classes. However, there were no suggestions arising from these discussions that received strong endorsements from the students in general.

6.3   Extra-Curricular Programs and After School Events

Students who are involved in extra-curricular programs, including those relating to sports and music, are believed to be better engaged with their teachers and the school itself.[16] As such, attendance is believed to be positively associated with extra-curricular involvement. In some cases, it is believed that involving students in these types of activities will reduce absenteeism rates.

The extent to which in-school extra-curricular programs are occurring appears to vary greatly by school and jurisdiction. In part this variation appears to be connected to available resources as well as to the priorities of school authorities. At one roundtable session, parents who have had their children enrolled in a nearby First Nations school complained that there had been no music program or arts and crafts available for the K-7 grade students.

One respondent captured the nature of how different programs connect up with attendance issues:

> *You could have before and after-school activities, lunch or breakfast programs, mentoring programs. Whatever will make the child come to school. We have to change the ways to attract and maintain children's attention. We have to be more creative in teaching. We know that teens go through different cycles and some kids have trouble getting up in the morning. Maybe we should try something new and start classes later and end later.*

Many individuals also mentioned the importance of having a breakfast or lunch program for attracting students of low income homes. It provides an incentive to attend school, while also promoting engagement in the class, due to students being able to pay better attention in class (due to having energy and not being hungry).

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[16] See for example, Knesting, "Dropouts," *op. cit.*, p. 174.

6.4   Absenteeism and Suspensions

Concern was expressed by a number of stakeholders about how a student's suspension can exacerbate a student's propensity to be absent from school, thereby leading to a heightened tendency towards not completing a grade and dropping out of school. Students who spend their suspension at home or in a non-monitored environment will likely fall further behind in their studies. Therefore, many educators prefer to have the student spend their suspension on school property, but away from other students. For example, a student is given school work to do in a library or resource room. A challenge for many schools, however, is that this strategy requires sufficient additional space and human resources for it to work properly. It was strongly recommended by educators at one roundtable session in which this was discussed that resources be found to address this challenge.

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Section 6.0 - Key Findings:

It is important that school materials and curricula are suited to the modern interests of school children. This might include developing new areas of applied learning and skills training, as well as enhancing creative in-class approaches to learning. This is especially important for those who have attendance-related challenges.

Some school administrators report that having systematic procedures by which staff and teachers are assigned to have daily contact with specifically identified students who are at risk has been effective for reducing absenteeism.

There is a strong sense that student engagement leads to higher attendance rates. School-sponsored extracurricular activities as well as before-and-after school programs are an important component for furthering this end and should be further encouraged.

School attendance policies are not consistent throughout the school divisions in the province.

Section 6.0 – Recommendations arising from the findings:

Both students and parents commonly report reliability problems relating to notifications of absenteeism being intercepted by the students themselves. Therefore, and where practical, schools should continue to use, or begin using, a "two-avenue" notification system, such as e-mail or cell phone notifications in addition to telephoning households.

Schools need to address the connection between "lateness" and absenteeism, whereby students who are late will be less inclined to miss an entire half- or full-day of school.

MECY should examine the systematic procedures being used by some schools to encourage daily contact with students who are at risk. This would be to determine the common factors that make these programs successful.

In order to prevent students undergoing suspensions from developing absentee-related habits, schools along with families should be encouraged to find ways by which suspended students can continue to work on their studies without being physically absent from the school.

To promote consistency, MECY should provide guidance to school divisions with regard to attendance policies.

7.0   COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Some stakeholders recommended that schools have to reach out to families within the specific context of each community. According to one principal, this means addressing the needs of the population that sends their children to the local school:

> *Each school needs to address the population they have and understand their community and what the issues are within that community. Schools need help doing this at a junior high and high school level. It has to be everyone working to help kids that are in crisis by getting different outside agencies involved like social assistance, Child and Family Services, the school and social workers, etc. We need to do whatever it takes to help kids in their lives to get them to school. We need to help them with their basic survival needs.*

Several stakeholders noted that this means different approaches will be needed in different areas – for example, between suburban communities and the inner city.

7.1   *Program Supports*

Most participants in this study, including students, noted that the community must provide as many opportunities as possible for children to participate in before-and-after school programs. These can involve sports or other forms of recreation, or they may be as simple as providing students with a place to do their homework. One service agency representative pointed out that his organization has a homework club which gives out a prize for every student who gets 100 percent on an assignment, thus offering "praise and encouragement" for students who apply themselves to their studies.

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Others community programs are aimed at overcoming other barriers to school attendance, such as transportation, by having volunteers provide rides to students. Generally, though, participants noted that the "community" – which means friendship centres, service organizations, etc. – must play an active role in ensuring children go to school while closely collaborating with families and educators. As one individual stated:

> *We need to maintain a close connection with the school staff, and to share information both ways so that we can keep an eye out for children who may be having problems, or who may be at risk. As a community centre, and almost the only recreational outlet in our community, we can often provide a different perspective or level of feedback than school staff receive directly.*

A number of stakeholders reported being concerned about the safety of the routes that students take to their schools, especially in areas of high crime or gang-related activities. As such "safety corridors" have been created in parts of Winnipeg's core area by which students can reach their school without fear for their safety.

Stakeholders identified a wide range of government and community-run programs that work with families and schools to ensure students stay in school and improve their education outcomes. Most of these programs are collaborative in that they work closely with the school system and with families, and many, especially those offered by friendship centres, Lighthouse programs, service organizations, community clubs, religious groups, etc. help students outside regular school hours through initiatives such as breakfast programs, youth activity centres and after-school programs. As one educator, who is also a parent, noted:

> *The time between 3:30 p.m. and 7 o'clock is a time when young people become vulnerable ... to negative peer influences. There are Lighthouse programs that are in place to give these young people a worthwhile place to go during these hours.*

Many view these programs, as well as those funded through the province's Healthy Child Initiative, as important to the future success of students who are at risk. Other programs that were identified by stakeholders as being connected to reducing school absenteeism and dropout rates included the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg's Communities for School Improvement (CSI) program, Big Brothers and Sisters' in-school mentoring program, Boys and Girls Clubs, the University of Winnipeg's Global Centre, the Frontier Centre's "homework clubs", and subsidized sports programs. One program that has moved from being a pilot program to a province wide program is CareerTrek. This program is overseen by the Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth and is held at different post-secondary institutions in the province on Saturdays between October and April of each year. It involves 10- and 11-year-old children from low-income families. As of 2006, 2,000 students had participated, of which 50 percent eventually enrolled in a post-secondary program.[17]

Worth noting is that government department stakeholders reported a need to find ways to better coordinate their efforts with regard to children who are at risk. Furthermore, it is important that children who are at risk children in the early grades be targeted for additional supports relating to learning and school attendance.

With regard to grassroots responses to issues involving concerns about students who are chronic absentees, in one community (Winnipeg's inner-city Point Douglas neighbourhood) a telephone "hotline" has been established by which parents or neighbours can call if they know of a child who is not going to school.

A number of participants who are located in rural and northern communities worried that the community is not doing enough or "not doing anything" to ensure students go to school. Others warned that insufficient work has been done by educators and administrators to build bridges between parents and community stakeholders of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. A means by which parents can meet together and between different schools along with educators is needed. "We have to meld together as a single community," one respondent said. The stakeholder roundtable session that was conducted in The Pas for this study was perceived by parents from nearby Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN) as a good beginning.

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[17] Province of Manitoba, "Province Provides Funding to Career Trek," News Release, November 4, 2006.

7.2   Truancy and Community Officers

There is concern that across Manitoba an insufficient level of resources have been devoted to truancy officers. Many educational stakeholders now see their role as somewhat outdated and call for these to be replaced by "community workers". These are already functioning in some areas by individuals who are expected to be culturally sensitive to the perspectives of different population groupings, and trained to both identify truant students as well as to serve in an outreach capacity with the families/households of truant students. The ultimate aim is to identify and possibly resolve the underlying cause for the truant behaviours by connecting the schools with the student's family. Some of the findings from interviews done with principals across the province revealed the following:

- In many areas where they are being used, the community officers are new to their positions and it is too early for principals to assess the effectiveness of these individuals

- In many areas of the province community stakeholders and educators reported that more resources need to be put into place to hire and make truancy officers and community workers more effective.

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Section 7.0 - Key Findings:

There are many departments and programs that are involved in promoting child development and learning within local communities, including efforts to reduce absenteeism.

Lighthouse programs and other after-hours programs are an effective way to help students who are at risk find a safe place to learn and recreate.

Ways by which community members can be better involved in promoting school attendance in their local area should be explored further. This includes parents of school-aged children as well as grassroots community organizations.

Many School Divisions have chosen to use "community outreach workers" in place of truancy officers in order to better address the underlying cause of truant behaviours. This is done by seeking out better communication channels with families of absentee students.

Concerns are raised by some community stakeholders and teachers that insufficient resources have been devoted in some communities to those who perform the role of truancy officers or community outreach workers.

Section 7.0 – Recommendations arising from the findings:

Because there are many departments and programs that are involved in promoting child development and learning, including the reduction of absenteeism, the Province should continue to work to ensure that departments are coordinating their efforts in an effective manner.

Attention needs to be paid regarding the extent to which young children who are at risk are receiving the support that they need to learn and recreate.

Further work is needed for government, communities, and existing grassroots organizations to work together to have in place safe after-hours programs and recreational opportunities for children.

MECY should continue to promote existing "safe route" corridors and support efforts to create new ones in areas where these are warranted.

MECY in partnership with school districts should explore the current function and role of community outreach workers and truancy officers, while determining if additional resources or training is required for these individuals.

APPENDIX 1: POPULATION DATA & ENROLMENTS

➲ **Manitoba School Age Populations and High School Completion Rates**

Manitoba's School Age Population

According to 2008 figures, Manitoba has the country's second-youngest population: half of those residing in the province are aged 37 years or younger.[18] The Manitoba Bureau of Statistics forecasts three cresting waves of high school graduates based on projections of the number of Manitobans reaching 18 years of age in the coming decade. These waves have been, or are expected to take place, in the following census years: 2008-2009, 2014-2015 and 2019-2020.[19]

Projections: 18 Year Olds in Manitoba
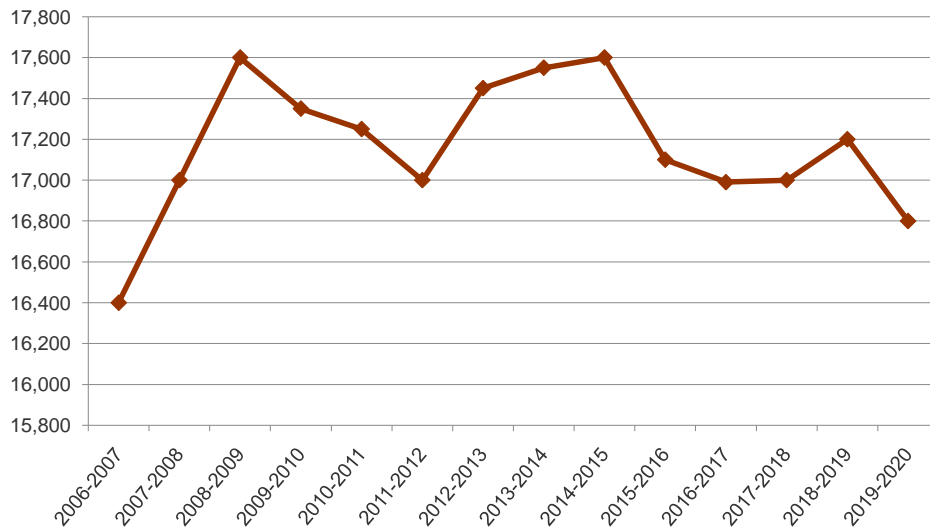
Figure A1: Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, Based on 2006 Census Data

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[18] Province of Manitoba, "Budget Paper A: The Economy," *Budget 2008*, p. A29.

[19] These are based on the 2006 Canadian Census as provided by the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics to Probe Research. The authors wish to thank Wilf Falk, Manitoba's Chief Statistician for providing these projections. Census years run from July 1 to June 30 of the subsequent year.

Enrolments

Figure A2, below, shows the most recently available data for enrolment numbers for students in Manitoba who are enrolled in Grades 1 to 8, as well as for those in high school grades up to the 2007-2008 school year.[20] The number of individuals enrolled in Grades 1-8 was 105,180, and 61,081 were enrolled in Grades 9 to 12.
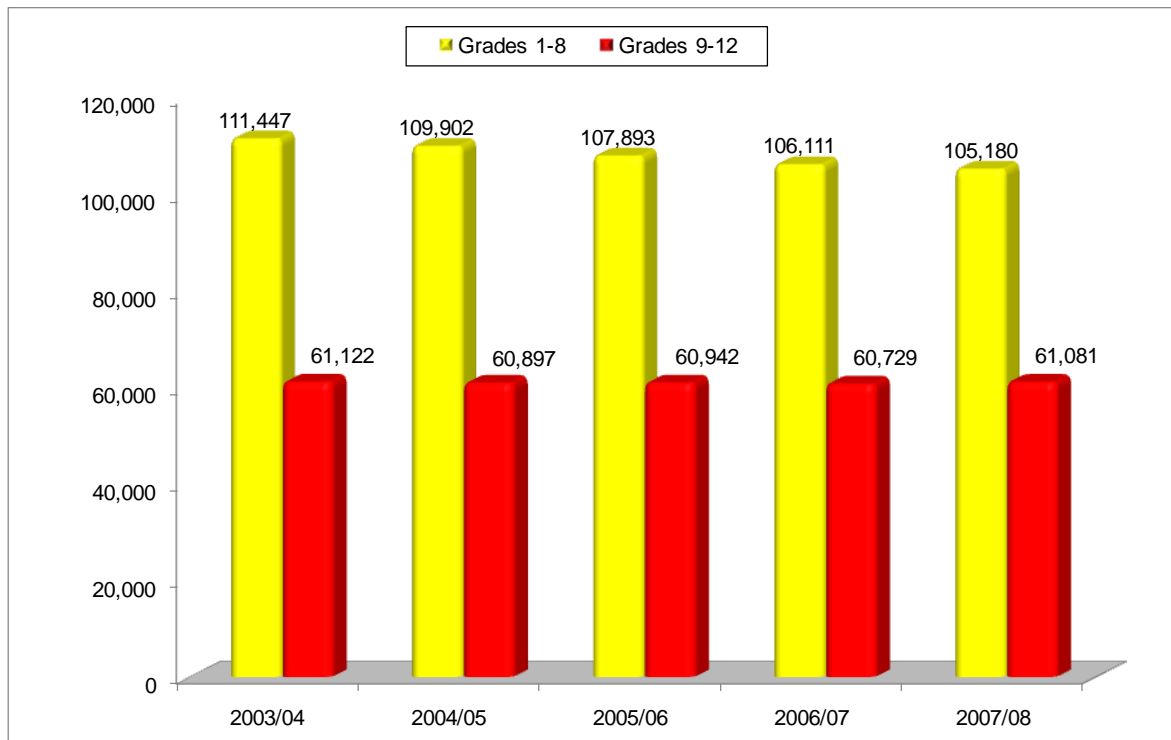
Figure A2: Based on MECY, a Statistical Profile of Education in Manitoba, 2003-2008, Table 1.

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[20] Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, *A Statistical Profile of Education in Manitoba: 2003-2008*, p.

High School Completions

According to Statistics Canada data, Manitoba's high school completion rate is 71 percent which is lower than the 76 percent completion rate for Canada as a whole.[21]

High School Completions
- Aged 15 and Over -
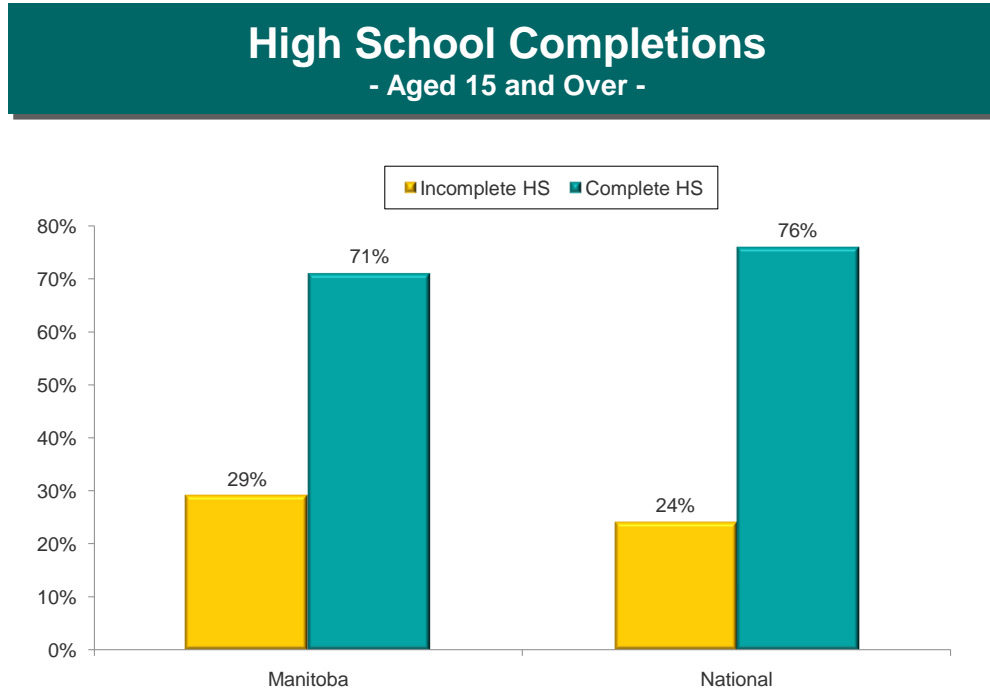
Source: Statistics Canada, Community Profiles, 2006.

Figure A3: Statistics Canada, Community Profiles, 2006

In order to promote high school completion rates in Manitoba, in May, 2008, the Province announced the creation of the $1 million Bright Futures Fund which is aimed at helping disadvantaged and low income students complete their high school studies, while also including elements to help individuals pursue a post-secondary program of study.[22]

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[21] Based on Statistics Canada Community Profiles data.

[22] Province of Manitoba, "Bright Futures Fund to Help Students Complete High School, Pursue Post-Secondary Education," Press Release, May 22, 2008.

Secondary Graduation Rate, 2005/2006
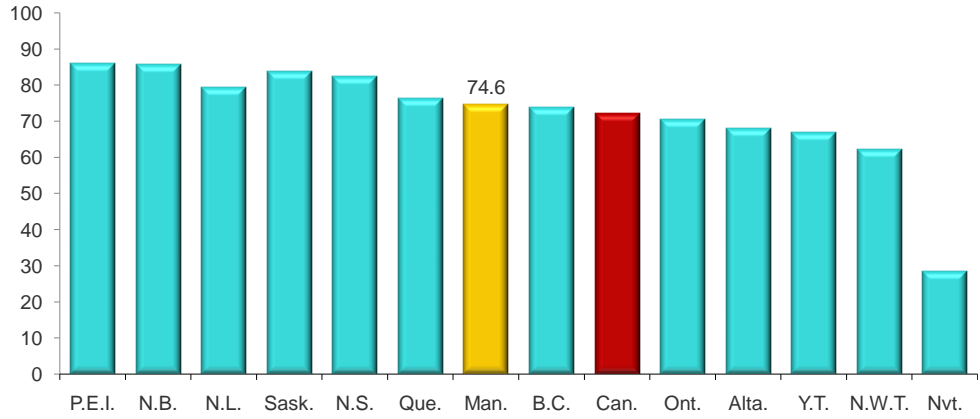
Based on the number of graduates at the end of the school year and population estimates. Source, Patric Blouin, *Summary Public School Indicators, for the Provinces and Territories, 1999/2000 to 2005/2006*, Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics, Statistics Canada, 81-595-M No. 67, July 2008, Table A.8.

Figure A4: Statistics Canada data

Total Percentage Change (Netted)
-Between 1998/1999 and 2005/2006 – Selected Provinces-
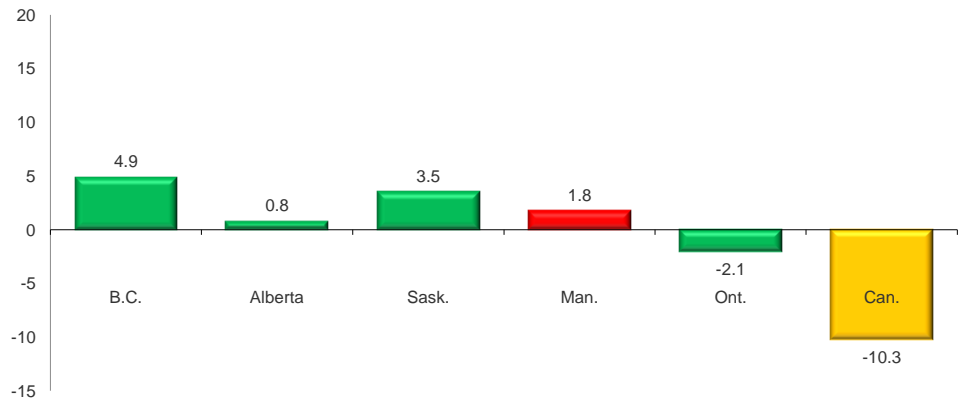
These numbers are based by summing up year over year changes from 1998/99 to 2005/06 as provided in Table A.8. Source, Patric Blouin, *Summary Public School Indicators, for the Provinces and Territories, 1999/2000 to 2005/2006*, Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics, Statistics Canada, 81-595-M No. 67, July 2008.

Figure A5: Statistics Canada data

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDES

- ➲ **Roundtable Moderator Guide**
- ➲ **Survey used for faxback**
- ➲ **Online survey instrument**

EDUCATION CITIZENSHIP AND YOUTH
COMMUNITY SESSION MODERATOR'S GUIDE
POINT DOUGLAS / THE PAS / DAUPHIN

— **Facilitator's Discussion Guide (updated 3 March 09)** —

Supplies Required:

LCD projector with laptop (for slides)
(A second laptop is brought by Probe for note-taking)
Area for projecting PowerPoint slides
A flipchart with full pad
Pad and pen for each person

Arrangement of Room:

Tables are to be set up as one large rectangle to accommodate all who attend
At one end of the rectangle should be the area where moderator sits.
Flipchart near area where moderator is sitting
If possible, area for slides to be shown should be near where moderator sits (to the right or left, and behind)

6:45-7:00 period for parents to have a refreshment and find a seat and to get comfortable

Title slide shown on screen

Introduction to the Roundtable Discussion

- Invitation for everyone to find a place and sit down. (1:00pm)

[Show "Objectives and Introductions" slide.]

- MECY representative welcomes everyone to the session and to explain the overall objectives of this study regarding School Attendance in Manitoba and that their attendance is part of a series of sessions being held across the province with students, parents and others. Introduction of Probe Research facilitator (Chris Adams).

- Facilitator (Chris Adams) introduces himself and his role.

Objectives and Background:

- This session is to get your input, perspectives and feedback regarding school attendance for those aged 5 to 18 in Manitoba.

- While everyone will certainly be speaking from his or her own perspective, it will be important that we get to hear from everyone in the group. So, at times I will be going around the table and asking people to share their views.

- Remind everyone to turn his or her cell phone off.

- This session is booked until 9:00

- Before we begin, I would like to go around the table and have everyone introduce him or herself. In addition, please tell us how long you have lived in this area and your general views about the community.

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 7:00 TO 7:20 (20 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 1 — Assessing Attendance & Absenteeism

[Facilitator posts slide "Assessing Attendance & Absenteeism"]

To start off the morning...
- What do we mean when we use the term "school attendance"?
- Now, what do we mean by the term "non-attendance" or "absenteeism"? Is it just the opposite of attendance?
- Is there a standard way that this might be measured or tracked in most jurisdictions or schools?
- Does Manitoba have problems relating to "school attendance"? If so, what are they?

[as these are mentioned, moderator writes these on the flipchart]

- Let's look at each of these issues and discuss each one. [moderator works through list on flipchart]
- Now, let's talk about attendance-related issues as they pertain to each of the following:
  - Families
  - Schools
  - Communities

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 7:20 – 7:45 (25 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 2 — Supports for Attendance

[Facilitator posts slide "Support for Attendance"]

- What core values pertaining to family, schools, and the community would you say improves school attendance?
  - o Let's first talk about family…
  - o Schools?
  - o Community?
- What supports are there currently for families, schools and the community in general with regard to dealing with concerns about school absenteeism.
  - o Family
  - o Schools
  - o Community
- Can each of you tell me about a meaningful experience that you believe helped resolve or improve an attendance-related issue?

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 7:45 – 8:10 (25 MINUTES)

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Discussion Component 3 — Policies & Solutions

[Facilitator posts slide "Policies and Solutions"]

- Can you describe any policies or new approaches you have seen or heard about that have been put forward by the government that would have an impact on school attendance in Manitoba communities?
    - In what way have they influenced attendance? Are they working well?

- What do families, schools and communities need to do to increase school attendance in Point Douglas?
    - Families
    - Schools
    - Communities

- What does the Department of Education or other parts of the government need to do to increase school attendance?

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 8:10 – 8:30 (20 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 4 — Working to the Future

[Facilitator posts slide "The Future"]

▪ Can you think of two or three practical ways by which school attendance of children and youth could be improved?

   [Moderator writes these on the flip chart]

▪ Imagine it is three years from now. Could you describe what would be in place in our schools or communities for ensuring that eligible students are attending school?
   o What specific supports would be in place to support school attendance?

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 8:30 – 8:45 (15 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 5 — Final Segment & Wrap-Up

The session is almost finished. We have now had everyone offer their collective input. Let's now get some of your own individual views, based on your professional experience and work within your departments.

On a scale of 1 to 10, with a "1" meaning that it has no effect and a "10" meaning that it has a powerful effect, please rate how much effect each of the following factors has in causing attendance problems for schools in Manitoba:

- – Transiency / Moving out of neighbourhoods
- – Dropping out / school leaving prior to graduation
- – Truancy / Skipping School
- – Suspension / expulsion
- – Other (specify)

That's it for the day! Facilitator and MECY representative thanks everyone.

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 8:45 – 9:00 (15 MINUTES)

EDUCATION CITIZENSHIP AND YOUTH
METRO SCHOOL DIVISION / THE PAS / DAUPHIN
STUDENT SESSIONS

— **Facilitator's Discussion Guide (updated 16 March 2009)** —

Supplies Required:

LCD projector with laptop (for slides)
(A second laptop is brought by Probe for note-taking)
Area for projecting PowerPoint slides
A flipchart with full pad
Pad and pen for each person

Arrangement of Room:

Tables are to be set up as one large rectangle to accommodate all who attend
At one end of the rectangle should be the area where moderator sits.
Flipchart near area where moderator is sitting
If possible, area for slides to be shown should be near where moderator sits (to the right or left, and behind)

1:15-1:30 period for students to have a refreshment and find a seat and to get comfortable

Title slide shown on screen

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Introduction to the Roundtable Discussion

- Invitation for everyone to find a place and sit down. (1:30pm)

[Show "Objectives and Introductions" slide.]

- MECY representative welcomes everyone to the session and to explain the overall objectives of this study regarding School Attendance in Manitoba and that their attendance is part of a series of sessions being held across the province with students, parents and others. Introduction of Probe Research facilitator (Chris Adams).

- Facilitator (Chris Adams) introduces himself and his role.

Objectives and Background:

- This session is to get your input, perspectives and feedback regarding school attendance among those aged 5 to 18 in Manitoba.

- While everyone will certainly be speaking from his or her own perspective, it will be important that we get to hear from everyone in the group. So, at times I will be going around the table and asking people to share their views.

- Remind everyone to turn his or her cell phone off.

- This session is booked until 3:00

- Before we begin, I would like to go around the table and have everyone introduce him or herself. In addition, please tell us what grade you are in and the school you go to.

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 1:35 TO 1:55 (20 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 1 — Assessing Attendance & Absenteeism

[Facilitator posts slide "Attendance & Missing Classes"] To start off the discussion...
- When you think about people missing school, how long would you say they could miss before it starts affecting their grades?
- Do you think missing school will hurt their chances for completing their grade? Why is that?
- When you see people missing from your class, what do you think the reasons are why they are absent

I am going to count you off and assign you to four different groups, and then ask you to join that group for a small brain storming session.
[Moderator posts large sheets on the walls in three locations around the room. – Markers are given to the groups]
Ok, other than being truly sick or in the hospital, I would like each group to come up with a small list of things that might cause students to start missing school. That is, I want each group to write down three or four reasons why students might be absent from school.
[Provide up to five minutes for list development - Once everyone is finished, moderator asks each group to report on what it came up with and to explain their items. As each group reports, the moderator creates a master list on the flip chart at the front of the room]

Dotmocracy Exercise
I am now going to ask you to each come up to the flipchart here where I have written down the summary list of what you students came up with..
Please take the coloured dots that you have and go up to the flipchart and stick them beside the items that you feel are the strongest reasons for causing students to miss school. You can split your dots any way you want. That is, put all 5 on one item or spread them across different items.

- Now, I would like to ask everyone to explain why they placed the dots in the fashion that they did.
- Let's look at each of these issues and discuss each one. [moderator works through list on flipchart]

- Now, let's talk about how these attendance-related issues relate to what is happening in each of the following:
  - Families
  - The students' schools
  - Local neighbourhoods or communities

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 1:55 – 2:35 PM (40 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 2 — Student Ideas about Attendance

[Facilitator posts slide "Ideas about Attendance"]

- As students, do you see anything happening among families, schools, or your neighbourhood that is helping to reduce students missing school? What are they? Are they effective?
    - o Family
    - o Schools
    - o Community

- What things could be done to improve school attendance? Let's first talk about family…
    - o Family
    - o Now, what could the schools be doing?
    - o And is there anything that people in the community could do?

- Can each of you tell me about a meaningful experience that you believe helped you or another student to start attending classes more? What was it and why do you think it helped?

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 2:35 – 2:55 PM (20 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 3 — Policies & Solutions

[Facilitator posts slide "Brainstorming"]

- Ok, I want you to do some more brainstorming. I am going to put you into the same groups again and ask you to come up with two ideas about what each of the following could do to improve students attending school where you are right now:

This is your chance to really have some input and I need you to think of some practical ideas.

Ok, here is the first:

1. What two ideas would you say about families? What practical ways could a parent or guardian help get their kids to stay at school?

   [group works on this and then it is discussed]

2. Now, what about the school itself and those who run it. What might they do to get some students to come to class more often?

   [group works on this and then it is discussed]

3. And, two ideas about the neighbourhood itself that you live in. What practical ideas can you suggest to community leaders to support the idea of students going to school?

   [group works on this and then it is discussed]

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 2:55 – 3:20 PM (25 MINUTES)

Discussion Component 4 — Final Segment & Wrap-Up

[Post Slide: "Wrap-Up"]

The session is almost finished. We have now had everyone offer their input. Let's now get some of your own individual views, based on your own direct experience as a student. I am going to hand out a piece of paper with two simple questions, and I would like you to tell me what you think needs to be done to help students miss fewer classes. Just a sentence or two is good for each of the questions!

Now, is there anything you wish we had talked about on the subject of school attendance and missing classes? Let's go around the room and hear if there is anything.

That's it for the day! Facilitator and MECY representative thanks everyone.

[Post "Thank You" slide up]

TIME FOR THIS COMPONENT: 3:20 – 3:30 PM (10 MINUTES)

FAXBACK INTERVIEW GUIDE

RETURN TO (204) 926-6566

The Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth is seeking input from representatives of important stakeholder organizations across the province in order to gather information about school attendance for school aged youth (aged 5 to 18).

If you have any questions, the director of this project at Probe Research is Chris Adams, and he can be reached at 926-6569. Or, Ms. Jean Hallas at the Program and Student Services Branch of Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth can be contacted directly. Her office number in Winnipeg is 945-0976.

- To what extent is school absenteeism a problem in your Manitoba? And Why?

- In your opinion, what prevents or inhibits eligible students from attending school?

- Are there any measures currently being taken by your organization to improve school attendance among students in your area? If so, what are they?

- What supports are there currently for families to help them deal with concerns about school absenteeism.

- What supports are there currently for educators and schools in your area to help them deal with concerns about school absenteeism.

- And please tell us of any supports, activities or programs being put forward in different communities across Manitoba to help reduce school absenteeism.

- And what else do you think is required from families, schools, and the community to improve school attendance?

Families:

Educators and Schools:

Community:

▪   Is there anything specific that can be done to improve school attendance among those students who have very high absenteeism rates?

▪   Can you think of two or three practical ways by which school attendance of children and youth could be improved?

- On a scale of 1 to 10, with a "1" meaning that it has no effect and a "10" meaning that it has a powerful effect, please rate how much effect each of the following factors has in causing attendance problems for schools in Manitoba:

	Insert Score Below 1 to 10
Transiency / Moves in and out of neighbourhood	
Dropping out / school leaving prior to graduation	
Truancy / Skipping School	
Suspensions / expulsions	
Other (specify):	

Please tell us the first three digits of your postal code (this is asked so that we might understand the responses we receive according to the major regions of the province):

Post Code 1ˢᵗ Three Digits: ___ ___ ___

Name_____   Title:

Name of Organization:_____

[This information is for acknowledging those who contributed to the study. Surveys will be aggregated and no person will be identified when quoted in the report.]

-
- As a last question, is there anything else that you think is important with regard to student attendance issues and which you have not yet had a chance to discuss in this survey?

Thank you very much for your time! Your answers are important to us!

Please fax back as soon as possible to Winnipeg:

(204) 926-6566

MECY ONLINE SURVEY
Effective Mar. 3, 2009

[Note to Reader:
This survey appears differently when accessed online. French language version also available.]

*1. Please indicate whether you are.....

        An educator 1
        A school administrator 2
        A school division administrator................................3
        A non-government organization / agency.................4
        A parent / guardian 5
        A student in school 6
        Other 7

*2. You mentioned "other" in response to the question above. Please specify.

*3. At what grade level do you mostly teach?

*4. What grade are you in?

To begin with, I would like to ask you to think generally about school absenteeism in Manitoba.

*5. How does your school/division define attendance and non-attendance?

*6. Are these measures based on specific standards? Or, are these measures simply based on what has evolved in your school/division?

*7. How does your school/school division/agency keep track of attendance data? Do you have any systems in place to do this?

        Yes 1
        No...2
        (Unsure) 9

*8. Does the system have a specific title?

*9. Can you please describe how this system works?

*10. What attendance data do you track? (i.e.: school leaving certificates, expulsion / suspensions, etc.)

*11. How is the collected data used?

*12. How has the data improved student attendance?

*13. Does your school division have a truancy officer?

Yes 1
No 2
Unsure 9

*14. Please describe that person's role and responsibilities.

*15. Please tell us about at least one experience that was meaningful to you and which you think helped improve school attendance for a student or students in your area.

*16. In your opinion, please indicate what types of core values pertaining to FAMILY would improve school attendance?

*17. In your opinion, please indicate what types of core values pertaining to SCHOOLS would improve school attendance?

*18. And, in your opinion, please indicate what types of core values pertaining to THE COMMUNITY would improve school attendance?

*19. What supports are there currently for families, schools and the community in general with regard to dealing with concerns about school absenteeism.

*20. From your own personal perspective, and thinking about your own family, local schools, and community, can you please explain what the attendance-related issues are as you see them?

*21. And what do you think is required from families, schools, and the community to improve school attendance?

*22. The following few questions are applicable to educators, school and school division administrators, parents/guardians and students in schools. Can you please confirm how you would identify yourself?

Educator 1
School administrator 2
School division administrator 3
Parent/Guardian 4
Student in school 5
Non-governmental organization/agency 6
Other 7

*23. As far as you understand, what is your school's policy concerning attendance?

*24. As far as you understand, what is your school division's policy concerning attendance?

*25. As far as you understand, what is your school's policy concerning attendance?

*26. As far as you understand, what is your child's school's policy concerning attendance?

*27. What are the things that stand out the most about these policies?

*28. How well are they working?

*29. What changes would help?

*30. What can be done to improve school attendance, particularly for those students who have higher absenteeism rates?

*31. Can you think of any approaches that are currently working to reduce absenteeism?

*32. What else do you think should be done to reduce absenteeism?

*33. What have you or your school / organization done to improve attendance?

*34. And what successes did you experience?

*35. In your opinion, what prevents or inhibits eligible students from attending school?

*36. Can you think of two or three practical ways by which school attendance of children and youth could be improved in your community or across the Province of Manitoba as a whole?

*37. Imagine it is three years from now. Could you describe what you would recommend having in place in our schools or communities to ensure that eligible students are attending school?

*38. What specific supports would be in place to support school attendance?

39. On a scale of 1 to 10, with a "1" meaning that it has no effect and a "10" meaning that it has a powerful effect, please rate how much effect each of the following factors has in causing attendance problems with schools that you are involved with.

    *Transiency/ Moving in and out of the neighbourhood
    *Dropping out / school leaving prior to graduation
    *Truancy / Skipping school
    *Suspensions / Expulsions

*40. Is there any major factor you would also include as being important?

        Yes 1
        No..2
        Unsure...9

*41. Please describe this major factor.

*42. And how would you rate this factor on a scale of 1 to 10, with a "1" meaning that it has no effect and a "10" meaning that it has a powerful effect?

*43. Please tell us the first three digits of your postal code. This is asked so that we might understand the responses we receive according to the major regions of the province.

*44. As a final question, is there anything else that you think is important and which you have not yet had a chance to discuss in this survey?

P R ⬤ B E
R E S E A R C H   I N C.