

## 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.

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.