SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT

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SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT TASKFORCE REPORT

15th October, 2005

Hon Louis Galea, B.A., LL.D., MP
Minister of Education, Youth and Employment
Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment
Floriana CMR 02

Dear Minister,

School Attendance Improvement Taskforce Review

We enclose herewith a Report following a review we have carried out of the situation and relative policies and services in the field of school attendance, in accordance with your letter and terms of reference of the 8th February 2005.

The Taskforce is available to meet with you to discuss this Report at your convenience.

We wish to thank all those who made their views known to us, and who helped us to progress with our deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Marilyn Clark
Chairperson

Silvio Borg
Member

Gabriella Calleja
Member

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1. INTRODUCTION

School absenteeism is a phenomenon with far-reaching consequences impacting on a variety of social actors ranging from the children who are absenting, to their families, their schools and communities, the criminal justice system, social work agencies, social service organisations and the economy.

Data presented later in this report indicates that non-attendance exists, and has become an issue of increasing concern for schools, educational and student welfare organisations. Non-attendance is viewed as being among one of the key problems facing some schools. There is increasing concern for the seemingly large number of children and young people who are, for a range of reasons, missing out on the benefits of education and possibly on a better future (Dr. L. Galea, The Times 9th February, 2005). Non-attendance can be the beginning of countless problems for students who regularly miss out on school (Heyne, King, Tonge, Rollings, Pritchard & Young, 1999).

Regular attendance is an important factor in school success. Students who are chronic non-attenders receive fewer hours of instruction; they often leave education early and are more likely to become long-term unemployed, homeless, caught in the poverty trap, dependent on welfare, and involved in the justice system. High rates of student absenteeism are believed to affect regular attenders as well, because teachers must accommodate non-attenders in the same class.

A country that strives to provide opportunities where its citizens have the possibility to succeed on a personal level as well as economically, has to give great importance to the issue of school attendance. As well as being the right of every child to receive educational provision, a nation must also work towards increasing economic growth and creating a socially cohesive society. Absenteeism puts a child in danger of not achieving the skills necessary to succeed in a constantly changing world.

2. A MATTER OF DEFINITION

The literature does not provide a consensus regarding an exact definition of non-attendance. Non-attendance has been acknowledged as a complex problem or phenomenon associated with characteristics of the individual, family, school and peers, as well as the wider context of society (Coventry, Cornish, Cooke & Vinall, 1984).

Attendance may be defined as 'participation in the program of educational activities arranged by the school' (Coventry, Cornish, Cooke & Vinall, 1984). Absences, on the other hand, may be authorised or unauthorised. While both are of concern, it is the latter which is normally viewed as problematic. This report will use the term 'non-attendance' and 'absenteeism' synonymously. There are many varieties of absenteeism.

2.1   *Unauthorised absenteeism with parental knowledge* – this type of attendance issue usually occurs in situations in which a parent or carer condones their child's late arrival or non-attendance at school. Alternatively, although parents may not condone such absence, they may fail or be unable to enforce attendance.

2.2   *School refusal/School phobia* – student's fear of attending school. Two contributing factors include avoidance behaviour in relation to school, and active seeking of situations that provide comfort and security (Anglicare, Werribee Family Services 2000). School refusal and school phobia refer to a syndrome that is recognised by an unwillingness to attend school, staying at home when not at school, parents who know and disapprove of their child's absences, and emotional upset at the possibility of having to attend school (Mitchell & Shepard, 1980).

2.3   *Truancy* – when a student is voluntarily absent or not attending school without their parents permission and often, awareness (Anglicare, Werribee Family Services 2000). Truancy is defined as unjustifiable or unexplained absence from school with attempts by the student to conceal the absenteeism. Usually the child avoids home when not at school and the parents are often unaware of the child's absence (Rollings, King, Tonge, Luk, Heyne, Ramsdell, Burdett & Martin, 1999). Sommer (1985) describes two types of truancy: chronic and occasional. The former includes the frequent truants, while the latter includes instances where students are absent for only part of the day through missing classes and arriving late or leaving early (Bell, Rosen, Dynlacht, 1994). Chronic truants are students who are absent without approval for 20% or more of school time (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1996). Ryan (1998) suggests that some degree of occasional truancy is considered to be a normal part of growing up in today's youth culture. Many students truant without it leading to serious attendance issues. Selective truancy is when pupils truant at certain times or stay off certain classes. This suggests that young people are actually making some positive choices about what they like and dislike, and find relevant or irrelevant about school.

2.4   *School Transience* – where a parent/carer unexpectedly withdraws a student from school without providing the school with contact or transfer details of the forwarding school.

2.5   *Authorised non-attendance* - where a child may be permitted to stay away from school for a variety of reasons, namely, sickness, medical and dental treatment, bereavement, domestic circumstances, study leave, religious observance, court appearances, weddings and travelling with the family.

3. ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH NON-ATTENDANCE

3.1 PREAMBLE

The concept of a single cause-effect relationship to explain this phenomenon is inappropriate. Rather one must consider a complex web of interrelated, interacting and multidirectional forces. These include individual or student factors such as psychosocial variables, physical factors, behavioural factors; family factors such as structure, functioning and socioeconomic status; school factors such as school organisation, curriculum and school climate; community and society variables such as poverty, community norms and demographic factors. Arching over the various risk factors highlighted above are others which compound problems or reduce potential resilience to overcome difficulties encountered. According to Adams (1978:54):

> when it comes to analysing root causes [of truancy] there are the wildest divergences of viewpoints and theories - the effects of a sick society, the abandonment of religious beliefs and moral values, the consequences of an unjust social and economic system, or even, as I have heard it convincingly argued, as a result of damage done to the nervous system by excess lead in the urban atmosphere in which many of us are condemned to live and work.

3.2 CAUSES OF ABSENTEEISM: FAMILY AND PERSONAL FACTORS

Reasons given by students for their continued absences from school primarily relate to home, school and health factors (Bishop, 1980). Numerous studies have shown that family and personal difficulties can contribute directly to non-attendance and dropping out of school (Dwyer, 1996). Aspects of an adolescent's personal and family experience that can lead to non-attendance at school include:

- Inadequate parental interest, support and recognition of the value of education;
- Low socio-economic status (SES);
- Culture and cultural expectations;
- Unemployment;
- Family dysfunction;
- Substance abuse;
- Abuse of / by individual family member(s);
- Learning difficulties and underachievement;
- Boredom and lack of motivation for learning;
- Isolation and inability to make friends;
- Low self-esteem and inappropriate anger responses;
- School phobia;
- Inadequate social and emotional functioning;
- Ethnic / race conflict;
- Failure to learn;
- Illiteracy;
- Health problems (child and parent);
- Over protectiveness by family members;
- Bullying;
- Mental health / depression;
- Transport;
- Peer pressure;
- Disability (Fisher, 2000).

Increasingly many families are subject to serious stress and consequently their capacity to support, both emotionally and financially, their offspring who are running into difficulties with their schooling, is limited (Dwyer, 1996).

Parents sometimes have limited interest in their child's education, keep them off school at times and think that the school has very little to offer in helping people become successful in the wider

world. Parents might think there is little connection between success at school and success in their later life (Brown, 1987).

Unemployment, low income and dependency on welfare, affect the family's ability to provide sufficient support to encourage a student to stay at school. The costs of books, uniforms, equipment, excursions, lunches and transport are often beyond the family's budget and a young person may leave school rather than be embarrassed or disciplined for failure to conform to requirements. Parents of non-attenders are also less frequently and actively assisting their children with homework (Bell et al, 1994).

Frequently reported causes of non-attendance are the result of parents asking their children to stay home. Children are often required to undertake duties such as caring/supervising their younger siblings, helping with the housework or working in the family business. One study conducted by Levine et al, 1986 revealed that 18.4% of non-attenders were kept home to care for siblings because of family problems (cited in Bell et al, 1994).

The importance that parents place on the value of education and school can often be clearly displayed for their children through their attitudes. Coventry (1984) found that the students of parents who had academically low expectations of them had higher levels of self-reported truancy. O'Keefe (1994) uncovered the positive effects of parental value of education when he reported that in a survey of school attenders, 48% of respondents chose to attend for fear of being found out by their parents (Bell at al, 1994). The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Report into Truancy and Exclusion from School (Canberra, Australia, 1996) stated that "rather than punishing parents, more support should be provided to families in their caring and nurturing roles, not only in terms of financial assistance, but in terms of the provision of programs which provide for the development of parenting and relationship skills, negotiating and problem solving" (Student Attendance Guidelines 1997:29 – Canberra, Australia).

The extended family is also particularly important. Even though, in some of the cases, the young person is unable to maintain a positive relationship with the parent, they may be able to maintain a positive relationship with their extended family.

Some young people experience distractions, including complicated family lives or situations that make it difficult for them to cope with school. There is a large body of literature, going back at least to the 19th century, seeking to explain truancy in terms of failings among children and their families (eg, Kline, 1898; Healy, 1915). In the 1920s, Burt elaborated the first concept of "school phobia", describing how some children stayed away from schools that had been used by them and their parents as air raid shelters during the Great War. They associated school with fear of death and became "neurotic" when compelled to go there. In the 1930s, there were the psychoanalytic theories of Broadwin (Tyerman, 1968), relating truancy to various complexes.

These earlier theories were not long accepted, if at all. Broadwin can be criticised for having reasoned from premises that were by no means certain and made conclusions with very little attempt to verify with empirical research. Burt's earliest concept of school phobia could not have lasted beyond the middle 1920s, and may have been an attempt less to explain truancy than to attract larger government funding for its treatment through the use of fashionable semi-medical terms. Even so, the tradition was set. Since then, many researchers have devoted themselves to discovering what is wrong with the personalities or backgrounds or both of those children who play truant.

According to various primary and secondary teachers interviewed by Farrington (1980), truants were lazy, lacked concentration, were restless, were difficult to discipline, did not care about being a credit to their parents, and were not clean and tidy on their arrival at school. The association of truancy with delinquency has been mentioned above. Otherwise, truants are said to do badly in intelligence tests (Farrington, 1980), to have low levels of self-esteem (Reid, 1982), and to tend towards unshapeliness and uncleanliness (Tyerman, 1968).

Their backgrounds are believed to be equally unfortunate. They are said to come predominantly from poor families, where the father - if actually present and working - has a job with low earnings and low status and low security (Tyerman, 1968, Farrington, 1980; Reid, 1986). They live usually in the inner cities, in bad and overcrowded properties (Tyerman, 1968; Galloway,

1980). There is a tendency for their parents not to care about punctuality or attendance or homework (Reid, 1986).

Whether - as by the teachers interviewed by Farrington (1980) - we regard truants in a moralistic light, or as the pitiable victims of circumstance, the conclusions reached by this line of research are straightforward. If children play truant, it is because they are, for various reasons, unable to cope with school. Truancy is their problem; and any attempt to stop them from playing truant must be concerned with readjusting them. There are however other ways of viewing the issue.

3.3 CAUSES OF ABSENTEEISM – THE SCHOOL

This whole line of research has been challenged. Carroll et al (1977), looking at schools in South Wales, doubt if children or their backgrounds can be the sole or even the principal cause of truancy. Reynolds and Murgatroyd (1977) are careful to show that the schools served a relatively homogeneous community with very small differences in the social class composition of the people who live in the catchment areas of the different schools. Yet the study finds that patterns of deviancy and attendance vary greatly between different schools within this homogeneous catchment area. The suggestion is that the schools themselves play at least some part in causing these variable rates. Rutter et al. (1979), investigating twelve inner-London schools, reach much the same conclusion.

A reason, though, why such research forms so small a part of the total of the research into truancy (Galloway, 1985) - is that it disturbs many of the researchers' most basic assumptions. It has been suggested that, irrespective of how good the evidence may be, the choice of where mainly to seek evidence has been prompted by considerations other than pure academic curiosity. There is the persistent belief, mentioned above, that schooling is good. Reynolds et al. (1980) (see also Jones,1980), note how hard it is, on ideological grounds, for many educational researchers to accept that it may *not* be good. This reluctance may at times have been increased by professional self-interest.

Cloward and Ohlin (1961) regard truancy as part of a wider delinquency caused by "blocked opportunity" within school. Working-class children begin their school careers reasonably confident about their aims and ambitions in life. However, schools tend to have a middle class bias and denigrate working class aims and ambitions. Schools often try to replace these working class aims and ambitions with others, which are often disliked by the children, who often may not have the sophistication or skills to consciously examine and/or reject them. The result is a disaffection with school and its ideals that can result in delinquency.

Mays (1964), writing of working class children in Liverpool, comments that delinquency is not so much a symptom of maladjustment as of adjustment to a sub-culture. Cicourel and Kituse (1963) look more to the structure of relationships within school between teachers and pupils, how these progressively erode the self-esteem of working class pupils and produce feelings of inferiority that, again, lead to delinquent behaviour. Such broadly is the view taken by Carson, Gleeson and Wardhaugh (1992). They accept the traditional description of truants as children who are normally defined as "problems", but Carson et al. go on to claim that the whole present structure of society, and not only schools, are responsible for truancy. There is, they say, "much pain, hurt and suffering around current educational arrangements" that derive from the preoccupations of the last century with social control and the "normalisation" of the new working class. The marginalisation of certain categories of children by the present system of schooling forces them into truancy as a "mode of resistance". This in turn gives the authorities an excuse to control "families living at the margins of respectability", so reinforcing their social exclusion.

For the large majority of young people, leaving school is influenced by the unsatisfactory nature of the school culture and of school responses to their needs. Failure at school may lead to absenteeism and behavioural confrontations, which in turn further isolates them from access to learning. A number of young people express a sense of injustice as to the ways in which they feel that schools have treated them (Reynolds, Jones, St. Leger & Murgatroyd, 1980).

Reid (1989) stated that many non-attending students experience an inability to feel part of their school culture. They also feel frustrated with schoolwork because they see the school's

expectations as being too high. Studies reveal that the factors most disliked by secondary school non-attenders are that they perceive their teachers to be authoritarian, unfair and excessively concerned with minor rules. These non-attenders also perceive their classrooms to have a high level of competitiveness and they generally perceive their schools to have too much authority over them (Bell et al, 1994).

3.4 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY

School non-attendance for younger children, especially of early primary school age, is generally regarded as being due to illness or parental instigation. Deliberate non-attendance, on the other hand, is thought to be a more appropriate explanation for older students (Coventry, Cornish, Cooke & Vinall, 1984). Reid (1989) states that with an increase in age there is an increase in deliberate non-attendance. Therefore, the upper levels in secondary school exhibit the highest non-attendance rates (Carlen, Gleeson & Wardhough, 1992).

4. THE MEASUREMENT OF ABSENTEEISM

One of the most basic questions facing any truancy researcher is - How many children fail to attend school? Once a figure has been found, it can be fitted into the various conceptual schemes to see what proportion of absences can and cannot be ascribed to truancy. But the figure must in the first place be found. The great majority of researchers find this by looking in the morning and afternoon registers of attendance kept by the schools and passed on to the local education authorities. This is where Tyerman (1968), for example, finds the data with which he supports his view that annual rate of absence from school is about 10 per cent. For all their differences over definition, their common reliance on the attendance registers allows most researchers to settle on a truancy rate of around 15 per cent.

The problem is, however, that the registers may not accurately reflect attendance. Cameron (1974), commenting on an Inner London Education Authority truancy survey - showing an average secondary school attendance rate in 1974 of 84.6 per cent (ILEA, 1975) - claimed that the registers were "wide-open to rigging" by head teachers and other interested persons. More important than casual fraud, is the possibility that the attendance registers are systematically under-reporting the scale of non-attendance.

According to Williams (1974), 'the most serious deficiency of the register is that it misses completely the children who skip class after the count is taken at the beginning of the morning and afternoon sessions'. He follows this with several passages of anecdotal evidence, indicating the potentially large scale of the problem - and therefore its refuting effect on much of the standard categorising of truants - but makes no effort to analyse or refine his own term "post-registration truancy". Following this introduction of the subject, Galloway (1976) looks briefly at "hidden truancy" and Reid (1985) at "specific lesson absence". But it was O'Keeffe (1981) who first uses the term in a systematic way, and develops from it an alternative curriculum-based theory of truancy.

In his first study of the subject, O'Keeffe (1981) divides truancy into two types. There is "blanket" truancy, where the child stays completely away from school, and which has been the only object of much study. Then there is post-registration truancy, where "the child is marked officially present at school, but is subsequently absent from some/all lessons". He claims that, while no systematic research had yet been done here, "such truancy is on a huge scale".

5. EXTENT OF NON-ATTENDANCE

5.1 THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

In the international domain, research indicates that different countries have varying non-attendance rates. Abbott and Breckenbridge (1970) calculate that some American cities especially in the industrial North East have non-attendance rates exceeding 50%. A large proportion of the non-attendees are from ethnic minorities. Reid (1986), in a cross cultural analysis of attendance and non-attendance rates found no significant difference between developed and undeveloped nations, both having non-attendance problems. However he found lower rates of non-attendance in Eastern European countries. Reid (1987) explains high rates of non-attendance as a consequence of inadequate secondary school systems. Authors are increasingly pointing their finger at an 'ill conceived curriculum', poor standards of classroom teaching and badly managed schools. Felsenstein (1987) and Sayer (1987) cited in Reid (1989) stress the need to establish a curriculum which is more relevant and appealing to less able and disadvantaged students. It is the latter who appear to be more likely to absent. Autonomous learning is likely to encourage attendance as is pastoral arrangement, including better links between the school and external agencies such as educational welfare and psychological services. Also follow up procedures to reintegrate absentees into the system and to help them to catch up have been suggested.

5.2 THE LOCAL CONTEXT

5.2.1 *Introduction*

For the purpose of this report, data on school absenteeism was collated from a variety of sources with the aim of gaining an accurate picture of the extent of the phenomenon in Malta. The sources included National Statistics Office (NSO) data which is readily available online (www.nso.gov.mt), statistics provided by the Education Division (Director of Operations), data from the School Social Work Service (SSWS) and data from the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC). The focus of this analysis will be on the NSO and the Education Division Data. The NSO collects annual data on absenteeism from form teachers in individual schools by means of a questionnaire. This includes state, church and independent schools. The Education Division collects data through the School Information Service (SIS), ADMIN programme. This is collected on a monthly basis from each state school. At present, the data from the Education Division for Church and Independent Schools is sparse and inconclusive. This is probably due to the fact that there is no similar computerised programme to ADMIN in these educational institutions.

5.2.2 *Total School Population*

According to the NSO, in the year 2002/2003, 11.4% of the total number of school days or an overall absence rate of 10.5 days per pupil were reported for all schools. The absence rate for boys (10.9 days) was marginally higher than that for girls (10.1 days). "The unauthorised absence rate for boys was 4.6 days per pupil while the authorised absence rate was 6.3 days per pupil; the absence rates for girls were 4.4 days per pupil for unauthorised absences and 5.7 days per pupil for authorised absences." (NSO, 2004).

An increase of about 2.0 per cent of absences on the overall total number of school days was registered from the previous year. This figure compares the 556,963 absent days for a pupil population of 61,389 in 2002, with 635,993 absent days for a pupil population of 60,648 in 2003. This increase resulted from a rise in the number of absences – authorised and unauthorised – at the primary level both within the public and private sectors, in spite of a population decrease in both sectors at this level. During the year 2003/2004, the overall absence rate was 10.2 days per pupil – 11.2 absent days for boys and 9.1 absent days for girls. This signified a decrease of 0.3% over the previous year.

5.2.3 *Primary Schools*

According to the NSO, State primary schools registered an increase of 1.8 absent days per pupil over the previous year, to 8.9 days per pupil in 2003 - 8.9 days per pupil for boys and 8.8 days per pupil for girls. The unauthorised rate for boys at public primary level stood at 3.3 days per pupil, whilst the authorised rate stood at 5.7 days per pupil. The unauthorised rates for girls stood at 3.1 days and the authorised at 5.7 days per pupil. During the year 2003/2004 state primary schools registered a decrease of 0.9 absent days per pupil to an average of 8 days per pupil.

The Education Division data indicates that for the year 2002/2003, authorised absences in state primary schools averaged 7.5 days per pupil. Of these 3.9 days per pupil were absences justified by medical certificates, while 3.1 days per pupil were excused. Unauthorised absences amounted to 4.5 days per pupil. This amounts to a total (authorised and unauthorised) of 11.5 days per pupil of possible days of attendance. For the year 2003/2004 the rate of absenteeism was 7 days per pupil.

A comparison of the data from these two sources indicates that Education Division data is higher by 2.6 days per pupil. This difference may be accounted for by the fact that NSO data is gathered over the first 120 days of the school year (NSO News Release No 144/2004), whereas the Education Division data covers the whole scholastic year.

For the year 2003/2004, authorised absences in state primary schools averaged 6 days per pupil. Of these 3.3 were absences justified by medical certificate, while 2.7 were excused. Unauthorised absences amounted to 4.2 days per pupil. This amounts to a total of 10.2 days per pupil of possible days of attendance.

According to NSO, Private (church and independent) primary schools also registered an increase of 1.5 absent days per pupil over 2002. The overall absence rate for these schools was 5.8 absent days per pupil - 5.7 days per pupil for boys and 5.8 days per pupil for girls. The unauthorised rate for boys at private primary level stood at 0.6 days per pupil, whilst the authorised rate stood at 5.1 days per pupil. The unauthorised and authorised rates for girls stood at 0.7 days and 5.1 days per pupil respectively. This data indicates that the absenteeism rate for state primary schools is higher that that in non-state (church and independent) schools. During the academic year 2003/2004, private and church primary schools registered a decrease of 0.5%. The overall absence rate stood at 5.3 days per pupil.

5.2.4 *Secondary Schools*

According to the NSO, State secondary schools (Junior Lyceums, Boys'/Girls' schools including Area Secondaries and those formerly known as Opportunity Centres) registered an increase in the number of absences per head, up by 1.1 absent days per pupil (from 16.3 in 2002 to 17.4 in 2003). The average unauthorised absence rate for boys was 10.9 days per pupil and the average authorised rate was 7.8 days per pupil. The unauthorised absence rate for girls was 8.9 days per pupil, whilst the authorised absences were 7.1 days per pupil. For the year 2003/2004 the average government secondary schools registered a slight increase in the number of absences per head up by 0.6 absent days per pupil.

The data from the Education Division highlights that in the year 2002/2003 the average amount of days absent per pupil amounts to 23.2. Authorised absences amount to 10.5 days per pupil while unauthorised absences amount to 12.7 days per pupil. Absences for boys appear to be higher than those for girls. Boys authorised absences amount to 12.2 days per pupil while girls' authorised absences amount to 8.8 days per pupil. Non-justified absences for boys add up to 13.0 days per pupil while the average for girls is 12.5 days per pupil.

The data from the Education Division highlights that in the year 2003/2004 the amount of days absent per pupil amounts to 22.5. Authorised absences amount to 9.6 days per pupil while unauthorised absences amount to 12.9 days per pupil. Absences for boys appear to be higher than those for girls. Boys authorised absences amount to 13.8 days per pupil while girls' authorised absences amount to 12 days per pupil. Non justified absences for boys add up to 11.2 days per pupil while the average for girls is 8.1 days per pupil.

The NSO reports by region while the Education Division reports by type of secondary school. Therefore, comparison is not always possible. The Education Division data immediately indicates a marked difference in absenteeism rates in the different types of schools. More specifically, in 2002/2003 the total number of school days missed per pupil in Junior Lyceums was 13.4, while that in secondary schools was 30.0, and that in ex-Opportunity Centers was 59.2. Further analysis shows that unauthorised absences in Junior Lyceums are lower than in secondary schools which in turn are lower than ex-Opportunity Centres (Junior Lyceums – 7.2, Secondary – 16.3 and ex-Opportunity Centers 35.1). Authorised absences show a similar pattern with Junior Lyceums averaging 6.2 days per pupil, Secondary schools averaging 13.7 per pupil and opportunity centers 24.1

More specifically, in 2003/2004 the total number of school days missed per pupil in Junior Lyceums is 13.7, while that in secondary schools is 29.9, and that in Opportunity Centers is 50.1. Further analysis shows that unauthorised absences in Junior Lyceums are lower than in Area Secondary Schools which in turn are lower than ex-Opportunity Centers (Junior Lyceums – 7.1, Secondary – 17.3 and ex-Opportunity Centers 34.1). Authorised absences show a similar pattern with Junior Lyceums averaging 6.5 days per pupil, Area Secondary schools averaging 12.6 per pupil and ex-Opportunity Centers 16 days per pupil.

Further analysis of the data shows that boys appear to absent significantly more than do females. This is depicted in table 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: *Absenteeism by type of school and gender – Scholastic Year 2002-2003*

	Junior Lyceums			Secondary Schools			Opportunity Centres			All Schools		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Population	3,969	4,517	8,486	4,358	3,908	8,266	459	307	766	8,786	8,732	17,518
No of possible days of attendance	576,272	695,801	1,272,073	625,090	571,331	1,196,421	66,342	44,590	110,932	1,201,362	1,311,722	2,513,084
No of days absent with medical certificate	14,895	13,976	28,871	47,809	32,682	80,491	8,330	3,489	11,819	71,034	50,147	121,181
% days absent with medical certificate	2.58%	2.01%	2.27%	7.65%	5.72%	6.73%	12.56%	7.82%	10.65%	5.91%	3.82%	4.82%
Days absent with medical certificate per pupil	3.8	3.1	3.4	11.0	8.4	9.7	18.2	11.4	15.4	8.1	5.7	6.9
No of days excused from school	5,846	17,744	23,590	24,035	8,541	32,576	5,844	800	6,644	35,725	27,085	62,810
% days excused	1.01%	2.55%	1.85%	3.85%	1.49%	2.72%	8.81%	1.79%	5.99%	2.97%	2.06%	2.50%
No of days excused from school per pupil	1.5	3.9	2.8	5.5	2.2	3.9	12.7	2.6	8.7	4.1	3.1	3.6
No of days of authorised absence per pupil	5.2	7.0	6.2	16.5	10.5	13.7	30.9	14.0	24.1	12.2	8.8	10.5
No of days of unauthorised absence	28,975	31,892	60,867	70,626	64,269	134,895	14,234	12,644	26,878	113,835	108,805	222,640
% days unauthorised	5.03%	4.58%	4.78%	11.30%	11.25%	11.27%	21.46%	28.36%	24.23%	9.47%	8.29%	8.86%
No of days of unauthorised absence per pupil	7.3	7.1	7.2	16.2	16.5	16.3	31.0	41.2	35.1	13.0	12.5	12.7
Total no. of days absent (all types)	49,716	63,612	113,328	142,470	105,492	247,962	28,408	16,933	45,341	220,594	186,037	406,631
% absenteeism	8.63%	9.14%	8.91%	22.79%	18.46%	20.73%	42.82%	37.97%	40.87%	18.36%	14.18%	16.18%
Total no. of days absent per pupil	12.5	14.1	13.4	32.7	27.0	30.0	61.9	55.2	59.2	25.1	21.3	23.2

Source: Education Division

Table 2: *Absenteeism by type of school and gender – Scholastic Year 2003-2004*

	Junior Lyceums			Secondary Schools			Opportunity Centres			All Schools		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Population	4,132	5,715	9,847	4,493	3,803	8,296	630	307	766	9,255	9,791	19,046
No of possible days of attendance	592,366	837,876	1,430,242	632,808	526,634	1,159,442	89,342	44,590	110,932	1,314,516	1,407,166	2,721,682
No of days absent with medical certificate	13,715	14,989	28,704	49,949	26,863	76,812	8,112	3,489	11,819	71,776	43,721	115,497
% days absent with medical certificate	2.32%	1.79%	2.10%	7.89%	5.10%	6.62%	9.08%	7.82%	10.65%	5.46%	3.10%	4.24%
Days absent with medical certificate per pupil	3.3	2.6	2.9	11.1	7.1	9.3	12.9	11.4	15.4	7.7	4.5	6.1
No of days excused from school	6,056	29,643	35,699	21,697	5,999	27,696	4,055	800	6,644	31,808	36,029	67,837
% days excused	1.02%	3.54%	2.50%	3.43%	1.14%	2.39%	4.54%	1.79%	5.99%	2.42%	2.56%	2.49%
No of days excused from school per pupil	1.5	5.2	3.6	5.5	1.6	3.3	6.4	2.6	8.7	3.4	3.7	3.6
No of days of authorised absence per pupil	4.8	7.8	6.5	16.0	8.6	12.6	19.3	14.0	24.1	11.2	8.1	9.6
No of days of unauthorised absence	32,113	38,199	70,312	76,759	66,977	143,736	18,519	12,644	26,878	127,391	117,436	244,827
% days unauthorised	5.42%	4.56%	4.92%	12.13%	12.72%	12.40%	20.73%	28.36%	24.23%	9.69%	8.35%	8.99%
No of days of unauthorised absence per pupil	7.8	6.7	7.1	17.1	17.6	17.3	29.4	41.2	35.1	13.8	12.0	12.9
Total no. of days absent (all types)	51,884	82,831	134,715	148,405	99,839	248,244	30,686	14,516	45,202	230,975	197,186	428,161
% absenteeism	8.76%	9.89%	9.42%	23.45%	18.96%	21.41%	34.35%	34.03%	34.24%	17.57%	14.01%	15.73%
Total no. of days absent per pupil	12.6	14.5	13.7	33.0	26.2	29.9	48.7	53.2	50.1	25.0	20.1	22.5

Source: Education Division

Private Secondary schools (church and independent), like in the public sector, registered an increase of 1.5 absent days per pupil over the previous year (from 4.3 to 5.8 absent days per pupil). The unauthorised rate for boys at private secondary (church and independent) level stood at 0.8 days per pupil whilst the authorised rate stood at 5.4 days per pupil. The unauthorised and authorised rates for girls stood at 1.3 and 5.3 days per pupil respectively (NSO, 2004).

5.2.5 *Comparison between state and private sector*

Clearly, the incidence of absenteeism in the non-state sector both in the primary and secondary level, is much lower than in the state schools, as the total overall absence rate in 2003 stood at 5.8 days per pupil as against 13.0 days per pupil within the public sector. Particularly, unauthorised absences rates were reported to be much higher in the public sector with 6.5 absent days per pupil, as compared to the 0.9 absent days per pupil in the non-state sector (NSO, 2004).

5.2.6 *Limitations*

The data presented above has a variety of limitations. Most importantly it measures prevalence rates and not frequency rates. Therefore we are unable to conclude whether a small minority of students are responsible for a large proportion of absent days or otherwise. Future data compilation should allow researchers to examine such issues. (Raw data may be found in Appendix A)

5.2.7 *Early School Leavers*

An Employment and Training Corporation study that looked into the School to Work Transition of young people in Malta highlighted early school leavers as being at risk of unemployment. Twelve young persons were interviewed and all reported that "they had not applied officially for a permit but were just absent from school, mainly on a medical certificate for most of the time

of their last few years of their secondary education. This was found to have happened even if the Welfare section usually investigates such cases" (ETC, 2004).

Reasons mentioned by the interviewees for not completing secondary education included peer influence, problems at school such as drug use and unwanted sexual advances by peers, a lack of interest in school and medical reasons. A common feature reported in this study was the apparent non insistence of parents for their children to attend school. This may be interpreted as a lack of interest in the child's educational attainment or a perception that education will not better the life opportunities for their children. One, however, has to point out that the small sample group may not be indicative of the whole population and thus significant associations to the whole population cannot be concluded.

A survey carried out by ETC in 2004 among registered unemployed youth (764 youth aged 16 to 24 were randomly selected from ETC's list of unemployed youth) found that 18.6% respondents stated that they did not complete their secondary level of education. Most common reasons for dropping out of school were to search for work, because they found school boring and family problems. Males and students previously attending area secondary and trade schools left school earlier than other students. Youth who left school early were more likely to stay on the unemployment register for one year or more than other youth and to have no qualifications.

5.2.8 *School Drop Outs*

A study conducted by the School Social Work Service (SSWS) in 1997 concerned 729 secondary school students who had either failed to attend school completely for over a year or were absent for long stretches of time during that year. A large proportion of these 729 children were registered with trade schools and opportunity centres and were mostly male. The majority of girls who absented attended area secondary schools. There was a very low rate of dropping out from Junior Lyceums for both girls and boys.

A qualitative analysis by the SSWS concludes that the main reason put forward by the drop outs themselves, as well as their parents, to explain their non attendance, was that they found school uninteresting. Other main motivators included bullying, school phobia, relationships with educators and the ease with which a medical certificate may be obtained.

5.2.9 *School Officials' Perceptions and Reactions to Absenteeism*

Important stakeholders in the student's educational experience are obviously the educator and other professionals working within the school. This section will explore the reactions of these key persons to the issue of absenteeism.

5.2.9.1 Introduction

For the purposes of this report it was considered important and necessary to supplement the prevalence statistics from the NSO and the Education Division, with a more evaluative research focusing on the key stakeholder's opinions about the issue. To this effect a questionnaire (see Appendix B) was constructed aimed at exploring school managers' perceptions and reactions to absenteeism. The research tool was constructed in two sections dealing with these two main research questions. The questionnaire was distributed to all schools in Malta with the exception of foreign schools. This is normally the procedure adopted by the Education Division when conducting research on schools in Malta. Thus, a total of 187 questionnaires were distributed by email. The response rate was rather good with a total of 126 valid questionnaires being returned. Table 3 indicates the number of valid questionnaires returned by type of school.

Table 3: *Number of valid questionnaires by type of school*

Name of School	Number of schools	Returned questionnaires	Unreturned questionnaires	Percentage of responses returned
Junior Lyceum Boys	5	5	-	100%
Junior Lyceum Girls	6	5	1	83.3%
Area Secondary + Centres Boys	15	13	2	86.6%
Area Secondary + Centres Girls	9	9	-	100%
State Primary Mixed	77	72	5	93.5%
Independent Boys+ Girls+Mixed	24	4	20	16.6%
Church Primary+Sec+Mixed Boys+Girls	44	18	26	40.9%
Special Schools	7	-	7	0%

The questionnaire was targeted for the Heads of Schools. This quantitative tool was supplemented by a more qualitative methodology, namely focus groups, with other social actors, including absentee students, teachers, school social workers and school counsellors. This was done to allow a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon to emerge. The findings emergent from the focus groups will be discussed in a later section.

5.2.9.2 Perceptions

The first section of the questionnaire dealt with perceptions regarding the causes and consequences of absenteeism. The first item of the research tool examined whether Heads believed that once a pattern of absenteeism sets in, if this was likely to continue and escalate. A large proportion of the respondents (110) agreed that this was the case. Similarly, all but two (2), agreed that prolonged absences are likely to effect the educational attainment of the young person. This result indicates that Heads perceive the issue of absenteeism to be one that will deteriorate and have serious consequences if left unaddressed. In this there appears to be almost unanimous agreement.

The third item dealt with the issue of prediction. In this regard a majority (88) of respondents believed that it is possible to predict whether a child who is in primary school will exhibit absenteeism later on in his or her educational career. This indicates that Heads feel that they have a fairly good idea of what factors contribute to the development and maintenance of the phenomenon. In fact, when asked to highlight, amongst a list of options, which factors contribute to the development of absenteeism, the following results were obtained (see table 4).

Table 4: *Perceptions of Heads regarding factors contributing to absenteeism*

Contributing factors	Frequency
Family Problems	110
Psychological Problems	109
Illness	109
School Phobia	101
Not interested in school	99
Problems with peers	93
Learning Difficulties	76
School curriculum not perceived as relevant	70
Problems with Teachers	66
Carer role in family	63
Discipline used by the school	50
Suspension from school	40
Resistance in observing school dress code	38
IT	33
Sent back from school for constantly being late	15

The above table clearly indicates that heads feel that absenteeism is mainly a consequence of family problems or else of either physical or psychological illness. Learning disabilities was also cited as a contributing factor quite often. This indicates the tendency to locate the source of the problem as lying within the young person or his/her family. They also identify lack of interest in what the school has to offer. This once again locates the problem within the young person as opposed to within the setting of the school. Problems with peers was also commonly cited as a reason for absenteeism, while a fair amount of Heads of School also highlighted that absenteeism may be a consequence of school issues such as irrelevant curricula or discipline procedures or problems with teachers. However, overall factors locating the problem within the youth and his/her family appear to have been favoured.

This is clearly reflected in an analysis of the responses to the open-ended question of what causes absenteeism and truancy. The responses gleaned from the questionnaire were coded thematically and are presented in the table below. The most common responses in this case were once again family functioning and lack of motivation. Although school factors were mentioned by some, these were significantly fewer than responses focusing on the child and his or her family context.

Table 5: *Perceived causes for absenteeism*

Perceived Causes	Frequency
Family Functioning	94
Motivation	38
School Academic Functioning	27
Medical/psychological problems	26
Relevance	26
Family Structure	24
School Social Functioning	23
Bullying	18
Peer Pressure	11
Work	5

Most of the Heads of School (73%) believed that teachers would agree with the reasons they gave for absenteeism and truancy. However, only 36% of the Heads of School felt that parents would agree with the stated reasons. This indicates how attributions may differ by the various stakeholders involved. Schools tend to blame parents, while parents in their turn, blame the school.

A large majority of the Heads of School (76%) reported that within their educational institutions

most of the absences are covered by medical certificates. This alerts to the possibility of persons abusing the use of medical certificates.

5.2.9.3 Reactions to Absenteeism

The second section of the questionnaire dealt with the respondents reactions to the phenomenon of absenteeism. A large majority of the respondents (77%) did not feel that absenteeism presented a particular problem in their school. Only 22% claimed that it was a problem they experienced in their educational institution. The majority of those who reported absenteeism as being a problem were Heads from state mixed primary schools followed closely by Heads of School from Area Secondary Schools (both male and female) and Girls' schools. The large number of Heads from state primary schools responding to the questionnaire might explain the high figure in this regard. On the other hand Area Secondary Schools have always been considered to have a higher absentee rate than Junior Lyceums and these statistics further confirms this hypothesis. These statements may give the impression that the problem of absenteeism solely belongs to the state school system. However, careful analysis of table 3 clearly shows that the numbers of responses to the questionnaire sent was by far higher in state schools than in the non-state sector. Therefore, since responses where fewer from the church (40.9%), and even more so from the independent schools (16.6%), it is difficult to conclude to what extent the problem of absenteeism affects these schools.

Half the respondents highlighted that their school had a school absenteeism policy. This might not necessarily be a formalised policy and might refer more to procedures instituted by the Education Division. Amongst those that did follow a policy, the most common response was that parents are informed by phone, followed by requesting a medical certificate, followed by informing the School Social Work Service (SSWS). Other procedures cited were: informing the parent via mail; following the Education Division procedures; and following up on work missed.

Of those responding to the questionnaire, 84% expressed the need for a national school absenteeism policy. The main advantage of such a policy was cited as creating uniformity and common guidelines for procedure. The Heads of School also felt that this would strengthen the position of the school and give them more control. Clearly the school administrators perceive the need for an official policy and standard guidelines for procedure. This is an important theme to be discussed in the recommendations.

In 122 out of 126 schools that responded to the questionnaire, the teachers or form teachers were responsible for taking the attendance in class. However, processing the attendance records was reported to be the job of the Head or Assistant Head of School. In some schools (24) this was the responsibility of the school clerk or administrative officer. A large proportion of the schools involved in this research take attendance in the morning (64). Only 6 take attendance in the afternoon. A significant number do so both in the morning and in the afternoon (28). 27 out of the 126 schools claim that they take attendance every lesson. The collection of absentee notes and medical certificates from children who have been absent is also normally the responsibility of the school secretariat (67) or the form teachers. In 19 of 126 schools surveyed this was the responsibility of the Head of School.

Only 9 schools claimed that they lacked a procedure for contacting the parents of those children who are repeatedly absent from school. 87 of the schools reported that parents are contacted by phone, while 28 said that they follow up the phone call with a meeting. 33 reported that they send a note or absentee form, while 17 claimed to make some kind of referral normally to the social worker or guidance teacher. Heads of School were queried about whether they had any other structures in place that address the factors that could lead to absenteeism. A large proportion (64 out of 126) claimed that they make some sort of referral either to the school guidance teachers, personal and social development (PSD) teachers (22), school counsellors/ psychologists (26) or else to the social workers (16). A very interesting point emerged in the responses to this open-ended question. Many answered to the effect that a good way to combat absenteeism is to establish a healthy school ethos namely through making learning fun, establishing good relationships with the families of the children who attend the school and generally making the school an attractive place for the child to be in. Some (11) also suggested using talks and seminars to address the problem.

An important issue to consider is the action taken by the school iwhen a child is absent for a prolonged period of time. The main action reported (93) was that of investigating the reasons for the absence by contacting the parents and perhaps even meeting with them and demanding a medical certificate. A large proportion of the heads simply rely on utilising the absentee forms and advising the SSWS. 17 make a referral. 7 schools claimed to send the school work home to the student so that s/he does not lag behind.

When asked what procedures are used for reporting absenteeism to the relevant authorities outside the school, most of the respondents claimed that their school compiles SEWO monthly reports. The Heads of School were given the opportunity to highlight which services, programmes or resources are absent but would be helpful in reducing the incidence of school absenteeism. In this regard, the highest response was having additional support staff such as psychologists, guidance teachers, special teachers and staff responsible to follow up students and even make home visits (39 of the Heads of School made this suggestion). 10% of the respondents were more concerned with the monitoring and verification of the many medical certificates issued. Only 7% claimed that they would like to see action taken so that the school curriculum is made to be more relevant to student needs.

Finally, the respondents were given the opportunity to make a series of recommendations. 12% of the respondents claimed that it is very important that some kind of action is taken to monitor and control the issuing of medical certificates. Many stressed that action should be taken against those medical professionals who may issue such certificates irresponsibly. 16% of the respondents focused on remedial issues such as having support services in order to address the academic difficulties that children encounter in school. Others responded by making recommendations for the need of policy development (13%). Thus, some Heads of School stressed the importance of a National School Attendance Policy and a termination of the three-day sick leave entitlement. 16% called for education of the parents on this issue. Once again the focus is not on the school's responsibility.

5.2.9.4 Discussion of findings

Some of the salient results require further comment. There appears to have been unanimous agreement that absenteeism is a serious issue and that if left without intervention will deteriorate effect negatively on a child's educational process. It therefore needs to be nipped in the bud. The likelihood that the situation will escalate therefore calls for early intervention. However, school officials tend to favour individual and familial explanations of absenteeism, as opposed to systemic ones. Thus, school managers are more likely to see absenteeism as a result of processes occurring within the child or his/her family, rather than a result of an educational institution that is not meeting the needs of the child. The potential labelling and consequent stigmatisation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds also needs to be taken into consideration. The focus placed by the Heads of School on individual factors needs to be addressed, however perhaps through further teacher training in differentiated methods and inclusive education, attitudes and beliefs can be influenced positively. While the Heads of School tended to cite the family background as an influencing variable they tended to report that parents would be unlikely to agree with them on this issue. This reflects the potential for lack of communication between interested parties in this area and alerts one to the need to include parents in the educational activities of the school. Research in fact indicates that when parents are involved in school activities, their offspring are less likely to encounter educational difficulties (Reid 1989). The Heads of School also alluded to the need for the employment of further support staff to help combat the problem. These results however should alert us to the possibility that school officials may at times exhibit defensiveness about this issue and fail to recognise their role and that of their educational institution in the problem. Heads of School also mentioned problems with peers as an important cause of absenteeism. This has implications for the development of policies that effectively address bullying and safety in schools, as well as, the imparting to young people of such social skills as assertion and conflict management. Another salient point to emerge from the results of the questionnaire considers the high rate of absenteeism covered by medical certificates. Clearly this has implications for the development of policy to curb possible abuse by the medical profession in this regard. The responses clearly indicate the perception of a need for a National School Attendance Policy whereby standardised procedures across all types of schools will be adopted.

5.2.10 *Focus Group Research – Understanding Why*

As part of the data collection procedure, it was deemed important to supplement the quantitative results emanating from the distribution of the questionnaire to all Heads of school, with a more qualitative tool. It was therefore decided that it would be appropriate to conduct focus groups both with absentee students and those working with them, namely heads, teachers, social workers, guidance teachers and school counsellors. In this manner a clearer picture of both the causes of absenteeism and the possible solutions to the phenomenon could be presented.

5.2.10.1 **Methodological Considerations**

Focus group research involves organised discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences of a topic. The benefits of focus group research include gaining insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation.

There are many definitions of a focus group in the literature, but features like organised discussion (Kitzinger 1994), collective activity (Powell et al, 1996 cited in Morgan, 1997), social events (Goss & Leinbach 1996) and interaction (Kitzinger 1995 cited in Morgan, 1997) identify the contribution that focus groups make to social research. Focus groups rely on interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher (Morgan 1997). Hence, the key characteristic which distinguishes focus groups is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants.

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, for example observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys. Focus groups are particularly useful when there are power differences between the participants and decision-makers or professionals, when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest, and when one wants to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993).

The focus groups were conducted using a set of open-ended questions emanating from the literature on the subject. The questions were used simply as a guide and the focus group session was conducted more like a regular group conversation with an informal stance. The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis through the coding and categorizing of key concepts emergent from the data.

5.2.10.2 **Analysis of Focus Group with Students** [1]

The data points to the salience of three major variables associated with the phenomenon of absenteeism: school factors, student factors, family and societal factors. These shall be discussed in turn.

a) School factors

The literature highlights the importance of considering systemic factors within educational institutions that contribute to young people's disaffection with and consequent alienation from schooling (Reynolds et al, 1980). Various such themes were emergent in the data and include pupil teacher interaction; emotional climate prevalent in the school; curriculum factors; school physical environment and procedural variables.

A salient theme to emerge from the focus group data was the impact negative interactions with teachers had on the young people in a school setting. While students claimed some responsibility for this by reporting that they often instigated the teachers and engaged in disruptive behaviour,

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[1] Three focus groups were held with secondary school students (12 girls and 13 boys) who were identified as being regular absentees.

many young people claimed that teachers treated them differently from other students, were not empathic and even hurtful at times.

"Il-preferenzi jdejquni - mhux ma' kulħadd jimxu l-istess"

"Jaqbdu magħhom it-*teachers*"

"Hawn *teachers* oħrajn li għandhom ħafna preferenzi"

"Ma jagħtux kas li ser iweġġgħu l-*feelings* tiegħek"

However, students often reacted to such treatment by acting in a disregardful and arrogant manner

"Kien hemm *teacher* li dejjem kienet tibgħatni l-*office*. Dejjem tiela' u nieżla. U jien kont ngħajjarha werċa meta kont nidħol fil-klassi. B'saqajja fuq il-mejda, kont niekol"

"Iżed jagħtuk attenzjoni għax jarawk kiesaħ"

Students claimed that teachers were often too strict with them and expected too much from them which instigated rebellion on the part of the students. Thus, emphasis is being placed on the reciprocal nature of the interaction processes that occur within the school setting. The teacher, who may have a schema of a particular youth will anticipate negative behaviour and act accordingly. The young person may then simply fulfil the prophecy. Teachers were described as being overly autocratic. This leads us to the next significant theme to emerge from the data. The school environment was described as being undemocratic with students having little or no say in any matters pertinent to their involvement there. The alienating effect of undemocratic educational institutions is documented in the literature.

"Jaħsbu li għax laħqu *teachers* kibritilhom rashom"

"U t-*teachers* mhux jikkmandaw. Iżed bħal hawn" (referring to tutors at the REACH programme organised by AĊĊESS of Aġenzija APPOĠĠ. REACH was a pilot study for school dropouts)

Thus, negative teacher-student interaction patterns and a predominantly undemocratic climate, contribute to young people's disaffection with schooling and their decision to stay away. However, not all teachers were viewed in a negative light. Those teachers who made an effort to engage themselves with the students and build positive relationships with them were respected and even loved.

"Mhux kollha jdejquni t-teachers. Hemm waħda nħobbha daqs id-dawl t'għajnejja……. Għandha karattru jogħġobni. Per eżempju, immur niftaħ qalbi magħha meta jkolli l-problemi. Tismgħani u tirrispettani."

Another salient finding from the focus group data concerned the curriculum. Many of the young people commented that they disliked academic work intensely and preferred to engage in trade and craft related activities in the school setting.

"Li nikteb, ajma. Dik li trid toqgħod tikteb. Jien ma kontx nikteb. Iweġġagħli moħħi"

"Jien naħseb li jekk iddejjaqna l-kitba, aħjar jgħallmuna affarijiet ta' sengħa kif kienu qabel. Ikun hemm skejjel mod u skejjel tas-sengħa. Jekk ma nħobbux l-iskola nistgħu nitgħallmu xi ħaga oħra."

"Nagħmel *Craft* biss"

However, the youths claimed that some subjects were perceived as a waste of time by the school officials who placed more emphasis on academic work which they failed in or disliked.

"Anke jien kont nieħu gost (Art), imma kemm ser iħalluk. Dik jagħtuha l-inqas importanza għax jgħidlek li qed taħli l-ħin."

Many perceived schooling as irrelevant to their lives and felt that it would contribute little to their chances of occupational success. However, many had occupational aspirations that probably fell below their level of ability. They felt that school was a waste of time and they would be better occupied if they were allowed to leave and find a job. Many of them in fact had previous experiences of employment and preferred it to school.

"Jiena jgħiduli imma ma mmurx. Jgħiduli mur ħalli ssib xogħol. Tgħidli mur l-iskola ħalli ssib xogħol la tikber imma jien bla skola xorta sibt xogħol. Jiena xebgħu jibagħtu għalija għal xogħlijiet u ma mmurx. U għadni żgħir. Biex issib xogħol m'hemmx bżonn ta' skola. Jien kont naħdem ma' tal-kartun."

"Ma għandhux x'jaqsam. Issib xogħol per eżempju ma' tal-ġinsijiet.'

"Iva imma ġo lukanda tnaddaf."

"Niġi ta' bil-fors. Kieku kelli sittax, naħdem… għax almenu tieħu xi ħaġa. Ara hawnekk l-iskola ma nieħu xejn. Ma tagħmel xejn."

Thus, the school experience was not only perceived as negative but also as irrelevant and bearing little on the outcomes that youth were expecting from their futures.

The physical environment of the school was also discussed. Some complained that the physical maintenance of their school was poor and that facilities were scarce. More specifically they claimed that more cleanliness and bigger classrooms were needed.

The students also discussed a number of procedural factors that influence their commitment to school. A major theme was the school uniform. Many of the children disliked their uniform and engaged in various methods to adulterate the dress code set out by the school.

"Jien bil-*jeans* u flokk kont immur."

This may be viewed as a form of symbolic resistance to authority and forms an important part of the anti-school culture (Willis, 1977). Students feel that they should be able to go to school dressed in every day clothes since uniforms were both uncomfortable and unattractive.

"Tas-Sajf qisha sarvetta u tax-Xitwa karnival."

"Il-ħarġa bla uniformi. Mhux qiegħda man-nies u bl-uniformi"

Another salient theme to emerge is the length of the school day. The young people commented that the school day was too long and that to top it up they had to do further homework when they got home. Perhaps those children who have difficulty in academic work and find sitting down writing for an extended period of time tiresome, find the daily routine quite difficult to adjust to. Another related issue was that the school transport starts far too early. Bullying was another theme to emerge but this will be discussed in the next section.

b) Student factors

While the organisation of the educational institution certainly has an impact on how young people relate to schooling, the literature also indicates that there are a host of characteristics experienced by some young people that place them at higher risk of having school problems and consequently experiencing disaffection with school and finally avoiding school. Truancy may in fact be understood as a form of avoidance learning a form of operant conditioning, which is particularly difficult to extinguish.

An emergent theme was the difficulty a few young people experienced in adapting to authority.

"U anki per eżempju trid toqgħod tgħidilhom biex tmur it-tojlit. Jien naqbad u mmur."

"Jien ma noqgħodx insaqsi – li rrid nagħmel."

Sub-cultural theories emphasise the differential norms that are prevalent in cultural grouping. Cohen (1955) claims that lower class youth face developmental challenges when they start school because their families are incapable of socialising the children into middle class values which dominate in the school setting. This results in poor communication skills and lack of commitment to education. Middle class measuring rods lead to poor academic performance. According to Cohen, schools are controlled by the middle class and thus lower class youth frequently do not meet their standards. These standards include good manners, non-aggressive attitudes, attention to grades and good study habits and participation in school activities. Cohen viewed delinquent behaviour, and truancy may be classified as such, as a protest against the norms and values of the middle class. In the focus groups this element of anti school culture and rebellion against the ethos of the school emerged clearly.

"Dik li trid toqgħod taqla' l-imsielet, ċertu sikkatura."

The young people resisted the rules set for them. They even claimed that in the town they resided in, a large proportion of young people do not go to school. This indicates to a collective solution attempted to be reached by a number of individuals.

"Aħna tan-naħa tagħna ħadd ma jmur skola jew ġieli jmorru u ġieli ma jmorrux."

It appears also that many of the young people participating in the focus groups were easily bored at school. Miller (1958) identified two working class focal concerns as being those of excitement and autonomy.

An important theme that emerged from the focus group data was the difficulties encountered as a result of poor relationships with other children. Poor school social functioning has been identified as being predictive of substance abuse and delinquent behaviour (Winters K. and Henly G., 1993)

"Is-sena l-oħra kelli ħbieb imma din is-sena kif mort u rajthom kollha bil-geddum, imbagħad ma ridtx immur iżed għax dejquni."

"Ma tantx kelli ħbieb l-iskola jien."

"Ċertu tfal idejquni."

"Joqogħdu jgħajruni għax bin-nuċali."

Bullying might also be a factor that contributes to school avoidance. The reaction of some students indicated that bullying was an expected phenomenon which happened when teachers were not around to observe. Reporting such incidents was deemed to be unsafe as this could result in further retaliation by the aggressor. Certainly having positive peer relationships is an important feature in adolescence.

A small number of students absent repeatedly, or for long periods of time, for health reasons. Alternative provisions for these students seem to be lacking.

One has to point out that all respondents were absentees. Further research could also investigate what instigates young people to attend school and are happy to do so.

c) Family factors

The literature on school absenteeism highlights the role of the family in promoting educational achievement and fostering attachment and commitment to the school. An important theme to emerge from the focus groups was how parents apparently abdicated control over these young people. While the children claim that their parents did encourage them to go to school, it is apparent that ultimately these youth did very much as they pleased.

"Jiena meta kont ngħix mal-mummy ma kontx ngħinha. U kienet tgħidli biex immur l-iskola, imma jien kont ngħidilha "mhux se mmur u jkollok titlaq mix-xogħol għax naħrab. Lanqas

ħaqq naqilgħek mix-xogħol." Jien kont nagħmel li rrid. Kont nheddidha. Imbagħad kienet tgħidli "aħjar toqgħod hawnhekk." Jew kont ngħidilha li ħa niġġieled. Jiena jekk ngħid li ma rridx immur, ma mmurx."

"Xejn ma jistgħu jagħmlu, għax jekk rasi tgħidli le, le."

Although it is the legal responsibility of parents to ensure that children of compulsory school age do attend school, the reality is that when students get older, parents might be unable to enforce compliance. This is probably truer if the family is having to deal with other issues at the same time.

A few of the girls but none of the boys mentioned staying away from school in order to help around the house. This was commoner where the family were experiencing family difficulties such as parental separation and parental ill health.

d) Societal variables

While much of the literature emphasised the impact of school, personal and family factors on absenteeism, other variables outside these contexts also have an impact. In this research it emerged that two factors contribute to promoting absenteeism among young people in Malta. The first concerns the ease with which one can obtain a medical certificate even if one is not unwell which has been a recurring theme throughout the drawing up of this report and the second concerns the readiness of various employers to illegally employ children under the age of 16.

"X'jiġri meta tirċevu n-noti id-dar min għand is-*social workers*. Il-ġenituri kif jirreaġixxu?

Risposta 1:   Il-mummy iġġib ċertificate mit-tabib tal-familja

Risposta 2:   Faċli iġġib ċertifikat"

5.2.10.3 Analysis of Focus Group with Professionals

In two focus groups held in May of 2005 with representatives of Heads of School, School Counsellors, Guidance Teachers and School Social Workers from both state and non-state schools the following themes were emergent as perceived by the participants:

•   The educational system was viewed as failing to cater for students who are poor in their academic achievement. They held that school is not attractive, even for academically achieving students.

•   Heads reported needing more autonomy in order to adapt syllabi to suit students with differing abilities. Syllabi and exam papers of Area Secondary schools should not be the same as for Junior Lyceum schools but be according to student abilities.

•   Several participants complained that there are parents who do not value the importance of education and were perceived to hold an anti-school culture.

•   Prevention in primary schools was considered to be of utmost importance.

•   All present emphasised that the exam culture is eating away at the students' sense of self-efficacy in relation to their academic potential.

•   The feeling of those present was that the system rewards the academically competent students and consequently ignores those with different learning styles.

•   Several participants stated that school syllabi need to develop further the vocational skills sector, in order to give students, especially those not academically oriented, more scope

in attending school. It was pointed out that it is important that a secondary school includes both academic and vocational paths so as to reach the potential of each student.

- The participants claimed that the ease at which medical certificates may be obtained by parents is perpetuating non-attendance and should be addressed.

- Social and family problems were seen as being a contributory factor leading to absenteeism.
- Both advantages and disadvantages of streaming were identified. It was felt that teachers found it difficult to cope with mixed ability classrooms.

A number of recommendations were put forward by the focus group participants and are reproduced below. These have been taken into consideration in the drafting on the National School Attendance Policy.

- Greater emphasis should be given to extracurricular activities. If necessary time should be taken out of other more academic subjects.
- It was suggested that school starts with an informal activity, such as skate boarding, dancing, sports as observed by some of the participants on visits abroad.
- Smaller class numbers were advised.
- Support services to include an increase in guidance teachers, social workers, educational/ clinical psychologists, Specified Learning Difficulties (SpLD) teachers, counsellors, PSD teachers etc.
- Early intervention should be a priority in primary schools.
- Further settings for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties should be set up. These should be resourced with a multi-disciplinary team including a psychiatrist, psychologist, social workers, counsellors, guidance teachers, youth workers, etc. This would involve a short-term placement with reintegration as the ultimate goal.
- A disciplinary board composed of school personnel together with elected students (by the students themselves) and parents should be set up within each school. Another option would be to have a disciplinary board composed of students with an appeals board composed of school personnel.
- A better utilisation of the media to promote the value of education and school attendance through the use of billboards, video clips, radio programmes etc.
- The service of the School Medical Officers should be reinstated in order to investigate long-term absences due to illness.
- Court procedures should be speedy and more effective.
- Court penalties should be uniform and be more effective as a deterrent.
- It was suggested that school-leaving certificates should also include the number of absences (authorised or unauthorised). This would serve as a deterrent for parents and students and emphasise the value and importance of education.

6. LOCAL ACADEMIC WRITING ON THE SUBJECT

Although a number of Maltese authors have researched the issue of absenteeism, it is worth noting that a substantial amount of this work focused on absenteeism in trade schools. Fenech (1991) writes that higher rates of absenteeism were present among Trade School students of both sexes. Sultana (1991) interprets this as a function of the fact that the population of students in trade schools was predominantly working class. In an article on Vocational Secondary Schools in Malta, Sultana discusses trade schools and their educational goals. Although trade schools were guided by the rationale of attempting to 'rekindle the motivation for learning in low and non-achieving students' (p 51), because they emphasised the division between successful and failing students and between middle and lower class students, often have the adverse effect of demotivating young people. Sultana highlights how the distinction reflects the structural divisions in society. Rather than viewing absenteeism as a reflection of individual and familial factors, attention should be directed to viewing absenteeism as a form of resistance to a school system which is not meeting the students' needs. The root of the problem lies therefore in the fact that the selective educational system in Malta fails to offer equality of outcomes to all students.

Chircop (1992) once again stresses the high rate of absenteeism in trade schools. She challenges the discourse which explains absenteeism by depicting students as deviant and which puts the blame on the absentees or on some deficiency in their background. She concludes that absenteeism and truancy are a reaction to an institution that has abandoned them and that is deemed to be irrelevant and restrictive. Teachers and school officials, however, fail to recognise this and provide pathological explanations focusing on deficiencies in the child such as low intelligence and emotional instability as well as in the family background, for example, lacking cultural capital. This contrasts sharply with students' perceptions. When students were allowed to voice their opinion about why they absent, the focus was on the school. She concludes that schooling is perceived as an unpleasant experience. Children are affected by the labelling processes. As a reaction to feelings of discomfort within the school setting, students absent and this further reinforces their negative academic self-image. The knowledge imparted in the classroom is perceived as irrelevant and curricula as alienating. Education then becomes a waste of time. However there also exists a culture clash between the working class students and the middle class school culture.

Azzopardi and Bondin (1991) cited in Cassar (1997) in their research in trade schools conclude much to this effect and stress the importance of teachers attempting to understand and appreciate the culture of these students. Cassar (1997) stresses the disillusionment experienced by trade school students that results in absenteeism. Polidano (1992) cited in Cassar (1997) discusses the high rate of absenteeism due to illness in trade schools and alerts us to the fact that large numbers of medical certificates are issued casting doubt on whether absences are really due to illness.

A doctoral research project by Clark (1999) on the criminal career development of young men in Malta examines how young men in prison have experienced schooling and what role this may have played in the development of their delinquent careers. Those features of the school organisation and the processes occurring in the school that might have encouraged the delinquent response and the emergence of a delinquent identity are explored.

A general theme emergent from the data was that most of the offenders in the study did not recall school or relationships with school authorities positively. The more negative the interactions with teachers, the more the child may come to dislike school. If a child cares about what teachers or other pupils think of him then he is less likely to jeopardise his positive standing in their eyes by engaging in unconventional behaviour. If he does not care for their opinion then this leaves him free to deviate. The young men in this study had made little, if any, investment in relation to the school, especially school subjects which they saw as mostly irrelevant to their lives. School work was looked upon as a useless and boring activity that should be avoided if possible. Many of them claimed that they did not like the academic part of school work and viewed the curriculum as mostly irrelevant. It seems like little at school captured these young men's interest. School seems to have been a frustrating rather than empowering experience, so much so that many of them simply opted out in favour of roaming the streets. While in most cases the boys tried to

hide from their parents the fact that they were not at school, some claimed that their parents were aware of their truancy and simply did nothing about it. Other parents even encouraged their children to stay behind so that they could give a helping hand around the house and at work. The end result of school related problems for many students is dropping out. Thornberry (1987) found that dropouts were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour throughout their early twenties. Dropping out of school may help to establish a youth in a delinquent way of life. In this way the school contributes to the development of the delinquent career (Hirschi, 1969). The school has been viewed as contributing to a variety of adolescent careers, such as 'academic', 'clinical' or 'delinquent' (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). Through processes of interaction some adolescents come to be defined by the school as social types, namely deviants, problem children, delinquents or potential delinquents.

The interviewees reported being singled out for special attention which further enhanced the dislike that they already had for a school system that was not meeting their needs. An emergent theme in the data was that disenchantment with the school resulted in further disruptive behaviour and a vicious circle was set in motion. The teachers, basing their opinions on past contact with the student may conclude that he is not interested in schoolwork. The message that the young men received seems to have been that they were more trouble than they were worth. At the time, this may have affected the way they feel about themselves. Self imputations of deviancy have their sources in typically recurring situations. If teachers, along with other significant others, define the young person as a problem, this may come to be included in their self definitions which in turn affect behaviour. Information from the student's previous schools or other agencies, such as social work agencies, may contribute to early categorising of students and to the lowering of teachers' expectations. The potential labelling problem in schools therefore deserves special attention. Examination of the data from the above mentioned study leads one to conclude that disaffection with schooling and consequent truancy may have a very negative impact on adolescent life trajectories.

7. CURRENT PROCEDURES FOR ADDRESSING ABSENTEEISM

The following points give an indication of how absenteeism should be presently tackled.

7.1 SCHOOL PROCEDURES

• Teachers register students who are present in class. The attendance is meant to be taken in each lesson in State Secondary Schools and Junior Lyceums. In Primary State Schools attendance is meant to be taken once a day.

• Attendance sheets in all State Schools are collected at the end of the scholastic day. These sheets are forwarded to the school clerks, who enter the data in a SIS computer programme. One of the aims of this programme, known as 'ADMIN', is to record and monitor attendance.

• Every month the school administration issues the non-attendance dates of each individual student through the ADMIN programme and sends the students' SEWO7[2] reports (with dates of absence listed) to the School Social Work Service (SSWS) in Floriana together with the SEWO7/B form.

• Only students who are absent for more than 3 days without justification during a particular month are reported to the SSWS. There is a misconception that students are "authorised" to absent themselves on 3 scholastic days every month. Presently, there are students who take days off from school knowing that as long as they do not exceed this limit, they will not be reported to the SSWS.

• On receipt of the forms entitled SEWO and SEWO7B from the Heads of School, the clerks at the SSWS, inform the parents in writing, of their son's/daughter's non-attendance through the SEWO7B[3] form. Parents are obliged to inform the respective school within three working days from the date of receipt with the reason/s for non-attendance. The form makes the parent aware that legal proceedings may be taken in Court in accordance with the terms of Article 44 Para (1) (b) of the Education Act (Chapter 327) of 1988.

• Parents may present justification to the Head of School for their children's non-attendance. Any acceptable justification is filed by the secretarial staff.

• Both justified and non-justified absences are documented on the bottom section of the SEWO7 form and signed by the Head of School. These forms are then again forwarded to the SSWS for action to be taken with regards to unauthorised absences.

• Reasons for absence covered by a medical certificate are not reported by the Heads of Schools to the SSWS. Long term medical certificates were previously investigated by the SMO (Senior Medical Officers) at 6, Harper Lane, Floriana. This system is no longer functioning.

• Parents who fail to act within a reasonable time of receiving the SEWO7 Form are referred by the Head of School to the Principal Social Worker of the School Social Work Service for further action/s. Such action/s often lead to legal proceedings (in accordance with the Education Act of 1988) or further social work intervention so that the cause of non-attendance is identified and addressed.

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[2] SEWO7 is the attendance form sent by Heads to the School Social Work Service with the dates of unauthorised absences.
[3] SEWO7B is the standard form requestion parents to provide justification for absence.

- Having received the SEWO7 form back from the Heads of Schools, the clerks at the SSWS again sort out each student report and pass on the file to the Social Workers for action to be taken.

- The School Social Worker analyses the report sent by the Head of School. When necessary and if possible the Social Worker will contact the parents for further clarifications. On most cases, in conjunction with initiation of court proceedings, home visits and schools visits are also carried out by the School Social Worker.

- In order to initiate court proceedings, files are given back to the SSWS clerks who finalise the court list. This is inputted into the Data Track Programme and the citations for court are issued. When the SSWS does not receive the absenteeism reports within a stipulated time frame by the Heads of Schools, they are unable to proceed legally and the citation to the parents cannot be issued (due to the prescription period which is that of 3 months from the first day of non-attendance at school).

- When the Heads of Schools report on time, the procedure from the first day of absence to the court hearing takes from 6 to 8 weeks.

- The Data Track Programme sends the citations to the Warden in charge. The Warden takes the citations to the SSWS where the Principal Social Worker, stamps and signs these citations on behalf of the Director, Student Services and International Relations (DSSIR). The Principal Social Worker keeps a copy of the citation while the other copy is delivered to the parents by hand by the local warden.

- The court hearings are summoned in 9 different Tribunal Local Councils. Social Workers are informed about the date of each court hearing on a monthly basis.

- Education (Court) summons are heard in conjunction with traffic and law enforcement hearings. The time of different education hearings may vary.

- When possible, the social worker asks permission to empty the courtroom in order to discuss sensitive information.

- Tribunal Sentences are executed through fines according to the Education Act, 44 1B. There is no conformity in the amount given in fines for similar offences.

- Most of the fines are not being collected by the Local Councils. There does not seem to be a follow up when parents are fined for failing to appear in court or when parents fail to pay the fine immediately after the hearing.

- In some instances Social Workers are called to be present at different Tribunals during the same day. This indicates that there is no co-ordination of these hearings.

It is immediately apparent that the system is inefficient and time consuming. The bureaucratic procedures do not allow for effective social work interventions to be executed prior to initiating court procedures. The policy document at the end of this report tackles various aspects of the system discussed above. The goal should be speedy intervention and less emphasis on prosecution as a first resort.

7.2 IMPOSITION AND COLLECTION OF FINES

The Local Councils do not have a particular policy regarding the collection of fines inflicted by the Local Tribunal in connection with cases brought forth by the Department of Education. These fines are treated like all other fines imposed under the Local Enforcement System and may be paid at any one of the Local Councils in Malta and Gozo.

Generally speaking, a person who is found guilty by the Tribunal and who fails to pay his/her fines receives two warning letters following which, if the fine remains unpaid, s/he will be liable further legal action in terms of sub-article (4) of Article 10 of the Commissioners for Justice Act.

However, to date, in view of the social nature of education cases, some local councils have refrained from pursuing this course of action.

The money collected through fines is used by the local councils to finance the Local Enforcement System and any surplus is utilised by them at their absolute discretion.

As regards the quantum of the fines imposed, by the Tribunal, much depends on the submissions of the Welfare Officers, the disposition of the offending children and their parents towards compulsory education. However, the Tribunal always acts within the parameters established by laws with regards to minimum and maximum fines.

It appears that one of the major failures of the system is the lack of a proper and effective enforcement structure and mechanism. Table 6 gives an indication of the extent of fines not paid in some local councils.

Table 6: *Fines issued and collected by Local Council Tribunals by Year*

Council	Year	Number of Cases	Acquitted Cases	Withdrawn Cases	Time-Barred Cases	Number of Proven Cases	Total Fines	Number of Fines Paid	Amount Paid	Number of Unpaid Fines	Amount Unpaid
Ħamrun	2002	699	69	92	250	288	Lm4,437	24	Lm362	264	Lm4,075
Msida	2002	6	0	2	3	1	Lm10	0	Lm0	1	Lm10
Pieta'	2002	2	0	0	0	2	Lm9	0	Lm0	2	Lm9
Qormi	2002	201	23	9	84	85	Lm1,239	24	Lm272	61	Lm967
Siġġiewi	2002	0	0	0	0	0	Lm0	0	Lm0	0	Lm0
Żebbuġ	2002	92	4	5	36	47	Lm726	7	Lm56	40	Lm670
		1000	**96**	**108**	**373**	**423**	**Lm6,421**	**55**	**Lm690**	**368**	**Lm5,731**

Council	Year	Number of Cases	Acquitted Cases	Withdrawn Cases	Time-Barred Cases	Number of Proven Cases	Total Fines	Number of Fines Paid	Amount Paid	Number of Unpaid Fines	Amount Unpaid
Ħamrun	2003	883	60	64	456	303	Lm5,018	29	Lm174	274	Lm4,844
Msida	2003	2	0	0	1	1	Lm25	0	Lm0	1	Lm25
Pieta'	2003	7	1	0	5	1	Lm25	0	Lm0	1	Lm25
Qormi	2003	172	13	8	87	64	Lm872	14	Lm95	50	Lm777
Siġġiewi	2003	0	0	0	0	0	Lm0	0	Lm0	0	Lm0
Żebbuġ	2003	94	5	5	15	69	Lm557	3	Lm22	33	Lm535
		1158	**79**	**77**	**564**	**438**	**Lm6,497**	**46**	**Lm291**	**359**	**Lm6,206**

Council	Year	Number of Cases	Acquitted Cases	Withdrawn Cases	Time-Barred Cases	Number of Proven Cases	Total Fines	Number of Fines Paid	Amount Paid	Number of Unpaid Fines	Amount Unpaid
Ħamrun	2004	1000	102	87	150	661	Lm11,745	97	Lm697	549	Lm11,048
Msida	2004	14	0	2	0	12	Lm205	1	Lm5	11	Lm200
Pieta'	2004	7	1	0	2	4	Lm80	0	Lm0	4	Lm80
Qormi	2004	103	13	11	8	71	Lm1,253	17	Lm148	54	Lm1,105
Siġġiewi	2004	0	0	0	0	0	Lm0	0	Lm0	0	Lm0
Żebbuġ	2004	48	1	3	6	38	Lm653	5	Lm38	30	Lm615
		1172	**117**	**103**	**166**	**786**	**Lm13,936**	**120**	**Lm888**	**648**	**Lm13,048**

8. CONSEQUENCES OF NON–ATTENDANCE

In not attending school/classes, children and young people place themselves at a disadvantage in relation to their peers (social and academically). These students tend to leave school early and are more likely to experience unemployment, which can then lead to poverty and even homelessness (Cohen & Ryan, 1998).

The most obvious and immediate result of non-attendance is reflected in the non-attender's academic failures. If students do not attend school, it is virtually impossible for them to receive the knowledge necessary to keep up with the level of their classmates and to pass subjects. Non-attendance is associated with low status occupations, less stable career patterns and more unemployment in adulthood, criminal behaviour, drug & alcohol abuse.

Regular attendance is an important factor in school success. Students who are chronic non-attenders receive fewer hours of instruction; they often leave education early and are more likely to become long term unemployed, homeless, caught in the poverty trap, dependent on welfare, and involved in the justice system (House of Representatives 1996:3).

High rates of student absenteeism are believed to affect regular attenders as well, because teachers must accommodate non-attenders in the same class. It has been suggested that chronic absenteeism is not a cause of academic failure and departure from formal education, but rather one of many symptoms of alienation from school.

9. DRAFT NATIONAL SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICY 2005

9.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

9.1.1   This document has three functions:

a)   it seeks to ensure that pupil attendance is given a high priority in all schools in Malta and Gozo and sets realistic targets for improvement;

b)   it outlines the services which need to be developed and/or consolidated to support schools and families in order to improve school attendance;

c)   it provides practical guidance for schools in ensuring best practice, including both a "model" school attendance policy and advice on the administering of registration.

9.1.2   This policy is the result of the work carried out by the School Attendance Taskforce set up by the Minister for Education, Youth and Employment on the 8th of February of 2005.

9.1.3   This policy is applicable to all schools, state and non-state.

9.1.4   This policy recognises the need to ensure maximum possible attendance in order that children in Maltese schools derive maximum benefit from the educational opportunities which are available to them. While an Education Act that enforces school attendance during the compulsory school years exists, and a School Social Work Service is already in place, the goal of the taskforce is to ensure that all aspects related to this issue are evaluated and suggestions made for amendments to procedures and structures in order to cater for those students who are falling out of the educational system.

9.1.5   Malta has a wide range of communities encompassing a variety of social contexts within which our schools operate. Schools which, almost entirely, serve a given geographical area, need to be responsive to the needs of those communities, some of which pose considerable challenges. This policy recognises the need to target resources at those schools which face the greatest problems and recognises the responsibility to maximise support to schools where their performance needs improvement, whilst providing a "lighter touch" with those schools who are performing effectively.

9.1.6   This policy promotes the introduction of a Focal Point, at a central level, to co-ordinate all matters relating to school attendance in order to maximise on present resources and identify lacunae in current service provision.

9.2 POLICY PRIORITIES

The following section discusses major policy priorities that need to be addressed in a national policy on school attendance.

9.2.1   Any interventions aimed at improving school attendance should address the various variables found to be associated with low attendance rates, i.e., school, student, family and community variables.

9.2.3   Any school attendance strategy must take into consideration the need to act quickly and consistently and to focus on early intervention. The policy recommends reinforcing the focus of attention on unauthorised absence of primary school pupils. Interventions could take the form of a combination of both remedial and punitive anti–absenteeism measures.

9.2.4   This policy recommends a comprehensive strategy focused on incentives and sanctions for absentee students and their parents.

9.2.5   Prevention should be an important priority of intervention and absenteeism can be covered from a preventative standpoint in much the same way as drugs, alcohol abuse and existing sex education programs.

9.2.6   Services should be as seamless and concerted as possible in order to maximise on resources and avoid the introduction of too many services, which may be counterproductive. In order to do this, one must encourage service providers to experiment with different ways of working across a range of agencies and to identify and remove some of the barriers in the system which prevent integrated service delivery.

9.2.7   The Minister should consider the setting up of a Focal Point that will co-ordinate matters relating to school attendance. The Focal Point will serve as a centralised structure to facilitate joined up activities among the various services already in operation.

9.2.8   This policy emphasises that schools and parents, have statutory duties with respect to attendance which should be carried out effectively with all pupils of compulsory school age.

9.2.9   Any strategy should strive for a new balance between casework with individual pupils and their families and the development of high quality advice and training to schools to assist them in addressing their attendance responsibilities.

9.2.10 Even with generally acceptable levels of attendance all schools could do better and even in a school where attendance is high there will be individual children who require a prompt and effective response to any problems they are having in attending regularly. The Education Division should therefore set aims and objectives both for itself and for all schools to ensure that promoting attendance receives the proper level of attention.

9.2.11 The principal means by which attendance in schools is supported is through the work of the SSWS. This service should be reviewed in order to maximise its effectiveness, most notably in relation to staff complement, funding, multi-disciplinarity, staff development and accountability. The level of service available should be discussed locally with heads of school, to give priority to those schools whose attendance is below the national average.

9.2.12 The Education Division has a duty to enforce attendance through the courts where necessary by the prosecution of parents. This should be used as a last resort when other attempts at reintegrating the child within the school system have failed. For this reason it is important to have available a range of alternatives to prosecution.

9.3 ACTION PLAN

9.3.1 *Setting Attendance Targets*

a)   Setting a target of 92% attendance for all Junior Lyceums (present attendance rate is 90.58%), a target of 85% for all area secondary schools (present rate is 78.59%) and a target of 75% for all girls' and boys' schools (previously opportunity centres) (present rate is 65.76%) to be achieved by the scholastic year starting in 2007.

b)   Setting a general target of 95% attendance for all primary schools, to be achieved by the end of the academic year 2007-2008. This general target to be supplemented by annual individual targets for those schools not yet achieving this level.

c)   Undertaking a review during academic year 2005-2006 of attendance in all girls' and boys' (ex-Opportunity Centres) schools in order to promote improvement in current levels. Despite the complex nature of their children's needs that may reasonably result in higher than average levels of absence, there is recognised concern that their school attendance may be unacceptably low.

9.3.2 *Focal Point*

a)   The Focal Point will be a centralised structure facilitating seamless service provision among the various services.

b)   This office will comprise a senior civil servant not below the grade of Assistant Director whose primary competence should be in the areas of management and data analysis. This office should also be resourced with the appropriate funding and clerical support staff.

c)   The Focal Point should provide high-quality advice, analysis of data, random inspection of registers and review casework services to schools in order to ensure the prompt detection of children whose attendance is a cause for concern and the effective use of a range of alternative strategies in order to effect improvements.

d)   The Focal Point will be responsible for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the situation of absenteeism in Malta.

e)   Explore the advisability of introducing the role of an official to act on truancy (could also involve wardens) who would be responsible for the policing and enforcement aspect and allow the school social workers to focus on social work interventions.

9.3.3 *Measurement, Registration and Reporting Procedures*

a)   Wide-ranging definitions of the different forms of absenteeism need to be decided upon. These could be extrapolated from the definitions highlighted in the School Attendance Taskforce Report (2005).

b)   A uniform system where all State, Church and Independent schools follow the same reporting procedures should be enforced. This might include the development and provision of a Software programme such as SIS to be used by all schools. The software should be user-friendly and allow inputting and processing of data and printing of reports.

c)   If possible make electronic registration available to schools and link the provision to ICT systems to enable more efficient data collection. If electronic registration is not available, effort needs to be made to ensure that data regarding absent students is inputted on a daily basis.

d) A uniform method of registration should be decided upon. This policy suggests that attendance be marked at the beginning of each a.m. session and at some point during the p.m. session.

e) Data should be forwarded to the Focal Point who would be responsible for the compilation of reports.

f) In order to facilitate early intervention, the School Social Work Service should have access to the data. The School Social Work Service should also have its own Case Management Software System.

g) Introduce a system of first day reporting where parents/guardians are contacted on the first day of absence. Schools need to ensure that valid contact details for parents/guardians are available from the first day of school and should include landline number, mobile, e-mail and address. This should nullify the necessity of the schools requesting justification of absence via mail and SEWO7 reports can be forwarded to the SSWS without delay.

h) Have, if possible, a separate phone line on which parents/guardians can call in to report absence so that they don't receive a busy signal.

i) Introduce reporting and follow-up on all unauthorised and authorised absences and not just those exceeding three days each month as in some cases, this is interpreted by parents and students as accepted 'leave' from school.

j) Messages regarding absence should only be accepted if received from the parent/ guardian.

k) Develop regular attendance review meetings at individual school level.

l) Appoint an official in each school to co-ordinate attendance with the appropriate time set aside to carry out this function.

9.3.4 *Legal Issues*

a) While holding that Court Proceedings should only be undertaken when all other alternatives have been exhausted, when resorted to, any fines issued need to be collected. The money collected from such fines should be reinvested in the schools concerned.

b) The Focal Point could explore the introduction of truancy sweeps carried out by partnerships between police, wardens and education officials working on the issue of truancy. The police and wardens would be granted powers to pick up (but not arrest) children playing truant and take them to a designated area or, sometimes, back to school. Generally, this power will be used through occasional 'sweeps' where police, wardens and education officials working on the issue of truancy join forces for a day and target particular areas, for example in shopping centres.

c) Neighbourhood watch schemes could be undertaken in those communities with high levels of truancy and absenteeism. Community members such as shop keepers could be approached and asked to refuse to serve children of compulsory school age during school hours.

d) Introduce legislation whereby Magistrates may impose a Parenting Order if this would help prevent further pupil absence. The Order would require parents to attend parenting skills courses for a specific period of time, as well as be followed by a social worker. It may also specify other requirements, for example, for the parent to escort the child to and from school for up to twelve months.

e)   Provide magistrates and magistrates' clerks involved in hearing attendance cases with appropriate training on absenteeism. If possible one single magistrate should be appointed to hear all such cases. This could be the same magistrate as the Juvenile Court and who therefore has experience in youth issues.

f)   There should be a consistency in approach at national level on agreed outcomes in non-attendance cases brought to court with uniform penalties for similar offences.

g)   Medical certificates that are dubious in nature should be challenged. Vide section 9.3.5. Training should be provided to the medical profession in order to prevent the issuing of unjustified medical certificates and emphasise the importance of school attendance for the well-being of the child. The re-introduction of the School Medical Officers in investigating prolonged medical absences should be reconsidered.

h)   Implement efficient and timely reporting procedures which ensure that, if required, court proceedings can be initiated and eliminate wastage of resources due to dual responsibility by both the school and the SSWS.

i)   Review, with the Focal Point, the use of statutory enforcement of attendance through the Magistrates' Court and develop new ways of working to facilitate prompt responses to unauthorised absence.

9.3.5 *Medical Certificates*

a)   While this policy recognises that there are cases where the issuing of medical certificates is justified, the apparent abuse of this system is possibly a result of the emphasis on Court action as a first resort. A change in strategy in favour of alternative responses to school absence and truancy might reduce the reliance on unjustified medical certificates by parents.

b)   However, some control on the issuing of medical certificates is necessary. Medical certificates presented by parents for any type of authorised absence from school on medical grounds should have the following:

   i.   The name, surname and address of the child being medically reported upon by a medical professional.
   ii.   The date of the medical examination and the period covered by the certificate.
   iii. The signature of the doctor making the medical examination. Medical certificates stating that a child is ill according to someone else's opinion should not be accepted.
   iv.   The doctor's rubber stamp and registration number.

c)   Parents presenting incomplete medical certificates are to be advised by the school why the certificate is unacceptable and asked to re-submit a complete version. Heads of schools are advised to keep a photocopy of the certificate as initially presented.

d)   The Education Division, through the Focal Point, will sensitise The Medical Association of Malta (MAM) to the need for the standardisation of medical certificates.

e)   The school is to keep the original medical certificate presented by the parent or child. It is advisable that the school registers the date when the certificate is received.

f)   In cases, especially long term absences, where the school considers the certificates to be dubious in nature, the Head of School should request, in writing, that a Medical Officer appointed by the Education Division, visit the child at home in the presence of his parents. This examination is to take place by appointment.

g)   The appointed Medical Officer should be informed of the dates of the student's absence and the diagnosis presented on the dubious certificate.

h)   The appointed Medical Officer should limit himself/herself to sickness verification or otherwise.

i)   The SSWS should be informed of the action taken by the appointed Medical Officer and the outcome of his/her visit.

j)   In cases where a child is hospitalised for a period of time the medical certificates issued by the Hospital are to be presented to the school on a regular basis. Once the school is informed that a child has been hospitalised, the Head of school is to make the parent/s aware of this requirement. Alternative educational provision should be made wherever possible through the hospital education service offered by the Education Division.

9.3.6 *Authorised Absences*

a)   Authorised absences not covered by a medical certificate while necessary at times should not be given indiscriminately. The following list although not exhaustive is indicative of what is acceptable.

   i.   Absent for an extracurricular activity such as sporting events or drama, licensed by the School or Education Division
   ii.   Pupil attending another school/unit and being marked there
   iii.   Exclusion for a fixed term
   iv.   Family holiday in term time
   v.   Attending an interview
   vi.   Day of religious observance
   vii.   Study Leave
   viii. Visits to dental clinics, opticians, physiotherapists, etc.
   ix.   Special circumstances not covered elsewhere.

b)   Only an appropriate Education Division temporary exemption can authorize the Head of School to excuse a child from attending school because a relation is ill. The Head of School should direct the parent/s to the appropriate office in the Education Division where such exemptions can be obtained, currently the School Social Work Service.

c)   While absence for travelling abroad during term time should be discouraged, in cases where permission is granted the following procedures apply:

   i.   Parents are requested to produce the exact dates of travelling prior to departure as well as the air ticket of the child in question.
   ii.   The Head of School is to keep a photocopy of the air ticket for record purposes.
   iii.   The Head of School can give a temporary exemption for the child to be away from school if the trip abroad is less than three weeks. For longer periods, parents need to be referred to the SSWS. A copy of such exemptions should be forwarded to the school.

9.3.7 *Service Development*

a)   Aimed at Students

   i.   Morning Clubs should be introduced for those children arriving at school too early due to transport schedules or working parents. These would include a range of organized informal education activities as well as study or homework support.
   ii.   Homework clubs could be introduced in order to provide an appropriate study environment and access to support for those students having difficulty

completing homework as this often results in repercussions the following day and subsequently avoidance of school. Where appropriate, study-support could also be introduced within the school time-table.

iii. Consolidate the literacy and numeracy support being offered by such entities as the Foundation for Educational Services.

iv. Increase the one-to-one support for students with poor attendance through the introduction of school personnel (possible also involved older, responsible students) who act as attendance advisors or learning mentors who would support students at risk of absenteeism in schools with low performance. Ideally these would be trained in informal education.

v. Include truancy as a part of the syllabus in personal and social development programmes.

b) Aimed at Educational Institution:

i. Introduce incentive schemes to encourage attendance such as badges, certificates, end of year prizes and excursions for students, classes and schools where attendance rates improve.

ii. Efficient and timely monitoring and referral procedures which ensure that children whose attendance is a cause for concern are identified. Initially support should be offered through the school's own guidance and counselling system, including appropriate contact with parents, potentially including home visits by school administrators. Only if required, should the case be brought to the attention of specialised services.

iii. Planned reintegration following significant period of absence whether authorised or unauthorised. Alternative educational provision also needs to be made for those students who miss a significant period of schooling due to illness. This could be a single prolonged absence or a shorter but recurrent one.

iv. Introduce Home-School agreements made with parents to help them take responsibility for their child's attendance seriously.

v. Further develop positive and consistent communication between home and school. The appropriate training should be provided for teachers to enable them to work with parents effectively.

c) Aimed at the Education Division:

i. Ensure sufficient human resources to facilitate a more timely response to referrals to a variety of specialized services such as psychologists and the Child Guidance Clinic.

ii. Strengthen and extend to secondary schools the provision of Special Educational Needs Teams (SENT) particularly in those schools at highest risk.

iii. Ensure the continuation and further development of specialized services targeted towards children with particular difficulties such as Emotional and Behavioural Disorders, anxiety disorders or school phobias and school refusal for both males and females. However, the ultimate aim of these programmes should always be the re-integration of these students within mainstream educational provision.

d) Aimed at Families:

i. Provide family strengthening services to truants and their families. Schools may arrange convenient times and neutral settings for parent meetings, provide homework hotlines and appoint parent liaison officers.

ii. Targeted parenting education programmes that would provide parents with the necessary skills to manage challenging behaviour that could lead to absenteeism.

9.3.8 *Staff Development*

a) Attendance issues should become a core item in the training of staff for potential leadership positions within schools; most notably head teachers and deputy head teachers.

b) Regular training for staff with registration responsibilities and monitoring of practice to ensure high standards by class teachers and others with key responsibilities.

c) Dissemination of examples of good practice on reducing absenteeism through websites, staff development days, seminars, etc.

d) Support structures for teachers, social workers, counsellors, psychologists and youth workers, that includes the appropriate supervision in order to maintain quality provision of service and avoid burn-out and staff turnover.

9.3.9 *Improving School Ethos*

a) Foster democratic leadership in schools such as through the introduction of student councils in all schools or involving students in system evaluation.

b) Create links between the school and the community through such initiatives as Open Days, visits to local businesses, day centres, NGO's, etc.

c) Emphasise the value of various vocational life paths that is affirming of a range of student aspirations as opposed to the purely academic.

d) Emphasise the value of diversity through exposure to different forms of family, lifestyles, cultures, religions, etc.

e) Fostering of a learning culture that recognises that children learn differently and at different rates.

f) Employment of informal educators within the school and giving value and accreditation to informal as well as formal activities within the school.

9.3.10 *Curriculum*

a) Ensure that the principles, aims and objectives outlined in the National Minimum Curriculum are actually implemented. The curriculum needs to be appropriate to needs and interests of all students.

b) The emphasis on technical or vocational curriculum along side the academically focused national curriculum is crucial.

c) Provide opportunities for success rather than failure in order to develop self-efficacy.

d) More utilisation of experiential or differentiated learning methods that are flexible and relevant.

e) Developing alternative educational programmes that effectively combine vocational and academic learning.

9.3.11 *Marketing*

a) Develop a Web Page on good practice to enable professionals to learn from one another's experiences. This could be placed within the www.education.gov.mt site.

b) Launch a national campaign to raise awareness of the legal responsibilities of parents with regards to school attendance as well as the benefits of school attendance and the risks associated with absenteeism. This campaign will make use of a variety of media including posters, leaflets, TV, newspapers, and radio.

9.3.12 *Further Research*

a) Conduct a full blown audit into the current processes used by schools to register and monitor pupils' attendance. The audit should be conducted randomly and regionally on a sampling basis. The purpose of the audit should be to:

   i.   ascertain variations in registration practice used by different schools
   ii. discover the rationale as to why some schools are currently 'authorising' unauthorised absences i.e. the 3 days off
   iii. Examine the role of Heads in defining individual school practice in registration processes.

b) There should be an appropriately funded research study into the relationship between staff absence from schools and pupils' absence. The relationship between high quality teaching and high pupil attendance is little discussed in the truancy literature.

c) More research into parentally condoned absenteeism.

d) Initiatives introduced to address school attendance should take the form of action research projects in order to identify their efficacy and to disseminate good practice.

10. CONCLUSION

This report has emphasised the importance of addressing absenteeism and truancy in a concerted manner. The text highlights the various types of absenteeism and stresses the complex etiology of the phenomenon. It follows that identification of a variety of factors associated with the likelihood of absenteeism necessitates responses that are equally diverse. Both the primary and secondary data examined for the purpose of this report have clearly shown that the phenomenon requires immediate attention and the recommendations in this regard have been formulated in policy format and presented in the previous section. The policy makes recommendations for both short term and long term strategies. It sets policy priorities and formulates a targeted action plan in order to tackle the salient themes emergent from the study. The draft policy constitutes an attempt to address the phenomenon in a coherent and comprehensive manner in order to ensure good practice and the maximization of educational opportunities for all children.

The document focuses on the issue of school attendance. Absenteeism is a very complex problem and the responsibility of a nation. It is the responsibility of the school to ensure that students receive the educational provision they have a right in a way that satisfies their needs. It is also the responsibility of the parents/carers to ensure that all children and young persons are accessing this provision. One needs to understand the issue of absenteeism. Absenteeism is not merely a lack of school attendance. The problem of absenteeism can affect the continuity of instruction and can disrupt students' learning. Absenteeism has the potential to affect the student throughout their life. Everyone understands the need and importance of developing our systems further to ensure the effective educational provision to all students, thus ensuring that they all get the best chance to succeed.

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APPENDIX A: RAW DATA

Scholastic Year 2002 - 2003

	Junior Lyceums			Secondary Schools			Opportunity Centres		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Population	3,969	4,517	8,486	4,358	3,908	8,266	459	307	766
No of possible days of attendance	576,272	695,801	1,272,073	625,090	571,331	1,196,421	66,342	44,590	110,932
No of days absent with medical certificate	14,895	13,976	28,871	47,809	32,682	80,491	8,330	3,489	11,819
% days absent with medical certificate	2.58%	2.01%	2.27%	7.65%	5.72%	6.73%	12.56%	7.82%	10.65%
No of days excused from school	5,846	17,744	23,590	24,035	8,541	32,576	5,844	800	6,644
% days excused	1.01%	2.55%	1.85%	3.85%	1.49%	2.72%	8.81%	1.79%	5.99%
No of days of unauthorized absence	28,975	31,892	60,867	70,626	64,269	134,895	14,234	12,644	26,878
% days unauthorized	5.03%	4.58%	4.78%	11.30%	11.25%	11.27%	21.46%	28.36%	24.23%
Total no. of days absent (all types)	49,716	63,612	113,328	142,470	105,492	247,962	28,408	16,933	45,341
% absenteeism	8.63%	9.14%	8.91%	22.79%	18.46%	20.73%	42.82%	37.97%	40.87%

Scholastic Year 2003 - 2004

	Junior Lyceums			Secondary Schools			Opportunity Centres		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Population	4,132	5,715	9,847	4,493	3,803	8,296	630	273	903
No of possible days of attendance	592,366	837,876	1,430,242	632,808	526,634	1,159,442	89,342	42,656	131,998
No of days absent with medical certificate	13,715	14,989	28,704	49,949	26,863	76,812	8,112	1,869	9,981
% days absent with medical certificate	2.32%	1.79%	2.10%	7.89%	5.10%	6.62%	9.08%	4.38%	7.56%
No of days excused from school	6,056	29,643	35,699	21,697	5,999	27,696	4,055	387	4,442
% days excused	1.02%	3.54%	2.50%	3.43%	1.14%	2.39%	4.54%	0.91%	3.37%
No of days of unauthorized absence	32,113	38,199	70,312	76,759	66,977	143,736	18,519	12,260	30,779
% days unauthorized	5.42%	4.56%	4.92%	12.13%	12.72%	12.40%	20.73%	28.74%	23.32%
Total no. of days absent (all types)	51,884	82,831	134,715	148,405	99,839	248,244	30,686	14,516	45,202
% absenteeism	8.76%	9.89%	9.42%	23.45%	18.96%	21.41%	34.35%	34.03%	34.24%

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire provides an opportunity to share your thoughts on what you feel is needed for your school to tackle absenteeism and become a more caring learning environment. Your genuine responses are very important in helping us to understand better all the issues connected to absenteeism.

The aim of the questionnaire is to explore school managers perceptions of and reactions to absenteeism in their schools. This will allow the Taskforce on Improving School Attendance to identify the best procedures to tackle the phenomenon and to assist in making the school an effective learning environment for all.

Section A: *Perceptions Regarding Absenteeism*

1. Once students have begun to absent themselves from school and the initial cause of this remains undetected or unexplored, it is likely that the pattern of absence will continue and escalate.

   a. _____ Agree   b. _____ Do not agree   c. _____ Do not know

2. All forms of absences, if prolonged, will affect the students' educational outcomes.

   a. _____ Agree   b. _____ Do not agree   c. _____ Do not know

3. Do you think one can predict in primary schools which children will be truant in secondary school?

   a. _____ Yes   b. _____ No   c. _____ Do not know

4. In your opinion, to what extent is absenteeism a consequence of the following factors in your school?

		Never	Occasionally	Frequently
a.	Not interested in School	_____	_____	_____
b.	Sent back home for constantly being late for school	_____	_____	_____
c.	Discipline used by the school	_____	_____	_____
d.	Resistance in observing school dress code	_____	_____	_____
e.	School curriculum not perceived as relevant.	_____	_____	_____
f.	Problems with teachers	_____	_____	_____
g.	Suspension from School	_____	_____	_____
h.	Problems with Peers	_____	_____	_____
i.	School Phobia	_____	_____	_____

j.   Psychological Problems   _____   _____   _____

k.   Learning disabilities   _____   _____   _____

l.   Illness   _____   _____   _____

m.   Family problems   _____   _____   _____

n.   To help the family   _____   _____   _____

o.   I.T. Entertainment at home   _____   _____   _____

p.   Other (please specify) _____

_____

_____

5.   From your experience within your school, are most absences from school;

a.   Authorised absences   _____

b.   Unauthorised absences   _____

c.   Absences covered by
     medical certificates   _____

6.   What do you believe leads to absenteeism and truancy?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7.   Do you think teachers would agree with your opinion of the factors that lead to
     truancy or would they cite other difficulties?

a. _____ Agree   b. _____ Do not agree   c. _____ Do not know

Comments:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. Do you think parents would agree with your opinion of the factors that lead to truancy or would they cite other difficulties?

    a. _____ Agree   b. _____ Do not agree   c. _____ Do not know

    Comments:

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

Section B: *Reactions to Absenteeism*

9. Is absenteeism or truancy a problem at your school?

    a. _____ Yes   b. _____ No   c. _____ Do not know

10. Does your school have a School Absenteeism Policy?

    a. _____ Yes   b. _____ No   c. _____ Do not know

    If yes, please describe briefly:

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

11. Do you perceive a need for a National School Absenteeism Policy?

    a. _____ Yes   b. _____ No   c. _____ Do not know

    Why?

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

12. In your educational institution, who is in charge in carrying out the attendance in each class?

_____

13. How many times a day is the attendance done in class?

_____ Morning   _____ Afternoon   _____ Both

14. Who is responsible in processing the attendance records at your school?

_____

15. In your educational institution, who is responsible for collecting, from those children who would have been absent, absentee notes or doctor's certificates?

_____

16. Does your school have a procedure for contacting the parents of those students who are repeatedly absent from school?

a. _____ Yes   b. _____ No

If yes, please specify:

_____

_____

If no, do you think one is needed?

_____

_____

17. What other programmes or structures do you have in place to address the factors that could lead to absenteeism?

_____

_____

18. Once a child is absent for a prolonged period of time, what action is taken on the part of the school?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

19. What procedures does your school follow in reporting absenteeism to relevant authorities outside the school?

_____

_____

_____

20. Are there any programmes, services or resources you don't have, but you think would be helpful to reduce the incidence of truancy and absenteeism?

_____

_____

_____

21. Other Comments / Recommendations

_____

_____

_____

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Thank you for your thoughts, time and effort in answering these questions.

APPENDIX C: RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH NON-ATTENDANCE

RISK FACTORS: THE INDIVIDUAL

Psychosocial factors

Self-esteem	Low self-esteem about specific area(s) or in general; lack of feeling of self-worth
Motivation	Low motivation, lack of interest, boredom, lack of engagement, low investment in pro-social goals; motivation towards antisocial goals; lack of interest in obtaining a satisfying job
Cognitive constructs, beliefs	Faulty beliefs about self and the world (example: unrealistic expectations of people); developmentally delayed levels of moral reasoning, empathy and other pro-social cognitions
Intelligence	Low intelligence
Ability to relate	Difficulty in establishing and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships
Bonding to family, school	Low attachment
Aggression	High level of anger and aggression

Physical factors

Health, illness and disability	Physical or mental ill-health; sensory, physical, intellectual or socio-emotional disabilities
Birth weight	Low birth weight, small height, perinatal complications
Autonomic and central nervous system arousal	Low level of arousal

Behavioural factors

Disruptive behaviour	Wide range of problem behaviours (e.g. tantrums, offensive language, provocation of others, attention seeking, teasing and bullying, violence), early onset and persistence of problem behaviours, alienation and rebelliousness, attitudes favourable to delinquency
Hyperactivity	Short attention span, constant physical activity, impulsivity, sensation seeking
Passivity	Withdrawal, disengagement, lack of participation, opting out (usually girls)
Pregnancy/motherhood	Unsafe sexual practices, early onset of sexual activity, physical effects (fatigue, stress) of teenage motherhood, also financial implications and barriers created by negative community responses

Offending	Early initiation, association with delinquent peers or criminal adults, adoption of anti-social norms, versatile delinquent behaviour
Substance use/abuse	Includes use of tobacco, alcohol, prescription and non-prescription drugs, inhalants, and illicit drugs, early initiation of drug use, association with drug-using peers or adults
Academic performance	Low literacy skills, poor academic performance, educational underachievement, continual experiences of failure, learning difficulties
Truancy	Early and chronic truancy, school refusal, persistent lateness, absence from classes
Association with anti-social peers, adults	Adoption of anti-social norms and behaviours
Sex work	Illegal, especially underage, involvement in sex work by girls and boys, for payment: money, drugs, housing, food
Social isolation	Few if any friends, isolated; impoverished social networks°

RISK FACTORS: THE FAMILY

Family Structure

Fragmented, reconstituted family structures	Marital breakdown, separation, teenage single mother, absent father, divorce, reconstituted family (step parent, de facto partner)
Family size	Large family size
Separation from family	Homelessness, foster care, multiple placements, ward of state°

Family functioning

Poor family management practices	Inconsistent, harsh or erratic management practices, poor supervision, permissiveness, parental rejection
Disturbed parent-child relationships	High parental indulgence, double bind relationships, smothering and over-protective parents, rejecting and neglectful parents, parental psychiatric problems
Conflict	High marital, parent-child and sibling conflict, cultural conflict, child rejection of parental values
Abuse	Physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse, lack of parental concern, support or involvement, parental neglect
Modelling	Antisocial, alcoholic or criminal parents, antisocial parental attitudes, values, beliefs, norms and behaviours
Mobility	Frequent changes in residential settings and schools, transience
Family disorganisation	Extreme family disorganisation
Impoverished social networks	Isolation, lack of support
Expectations	Low/absent parental expectations for learning/achievement

Family socio-economic status

Income	Low parental income, associated with deprivation in many aspects of life, as well as presence of many negative influences
Education	Low parental educational attainment, associated with deprivation in many aspects of life, as well as presence of many negative influences
Employment	Uncertainty about employment, extended periods of unemployment

RISK FACTORS: THE SCHOOL

School organisation

Organisational policies and practices	Rigid and restrictive policies and practices, inflexibility
Discipline	Authoritarian, repressive discipline, inconsistent or ineffectual application of policy, perception and treatment of some students as troublemakers, use of suspension and expulsion to marginalise then remove them
School leaving and re-entry	Lack of information and assistance to early leavers, barriers placed in the path of re-entry
Size of class, school	Large class size, with lack of individual attention, large school size without sub-structures to provide sense of belonging and pastoral care

Curriculum

Content	Unrelated to the world of the student, uninteresting, unstimulating, small range of subject choice (especially in practical and vocationally-oriented areas)
Decision-making	Lack of student participation in decisions about curriculum organisation content, process and assessment
Teaching-learning strategies	Emphasis on receptive, passive learning, minimal interaction with teachers and peers, lack of co-operative, activity-based and independent learning
Assessment	High competitive pressure, examination-dominated assessment, use of one-off rather than progressive assessment°

School climate

School culture	Negative, unsupportive, uninteresting, unchallenging, domineering, punitive, stultifying, inflexible, violent
Teacher/student relationships	Negative relationships, teachers' lack of respect or support for, fairness to, understanding and acceptance of students, lack of interaction, teacher perception and treatment of students as immature

Peer relationships	Early peer rejection, intimidation, bullying, verbal and physical abuse, violence, sexual and racial harassment, presence of powerful antisocial gangs/peer groups
School counsellors	Absence of pastoral, welfare and counselling staff, absence of specialist staff to assist with academic problems
Student participation	No opportunity for student participation in decision-making structure or school organisation, students not seen as capable of productive involvement
School/home relationships	Lack of parent involvement, lack of communication, inconsistent treatment and requirements of young people by home and school
Staff professional development	Inability of staff to adapt to societal and educational change, or to the changing needs and behaviour of students°

Risk Factors: Community and Society

Poverty	Implications to be found in virtually all contexts in which risk factors are identified, social disempowerment, extreme social and economic deprivation
Community norms	Norms favourable to anti-social behaviour
Neighbourhood disorganisation	High-density urban neighbourhood with high crime rate, high mobility, physical deterioration, low levels of attachment to neighbourhood
Demographic factors	Gender, ethnicity

Reid (1986) groups the explanations put forward for absenteeism into four categories
1. psychological – the existence of deeper disturbances in the pupil. This might result in what has been termed school phobia or school refusal
2. sociological – focuses on the social and cultural differences between the social classes
3. educational – the reaction to failure in school work
4. institutional – the pupil's disaffection with schooling

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS – STUDENTS

1. Why do you think children are absent from school so much? What about yourself – why are you absent from school so much?
2. Are there things happening at home that make it difficult for you to take school seriously or to concentrate when you get there? Can we talk about this for a while?
3. Are there things happening at school that make it difficult for you to take school seriously or to concentrate once you are there? Can we talk about this for a while?
4. Are there things going on with you personally that make it difficult for you to take school seriously or to concentrate once you are there? Can we talk about this for a while?
5. What do you think could be done to increase school attendance? What would help you to become more interested in coming to school? What can A. parents do? B. teachers do? C. the school do?
6. Do you feel safe and comfortable at school? What could be done to make you feel safer and more comfortable?
7. What do you like most about school? What do you like least about school?
8. What could make learning more fun for you?