This paper was developed by the Department of Education, Training and Employment’s Data Analytics Committee to provide information on trends and issues in School Disciplinary Absences (SDAs) in Queensland state schools.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Positive schools and students

The Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) is committed to ensuring that all Queensland state schools provide positive and safe learning environments.

A broad range of strategies is used by state schools to address student behaviour challenges. This includes School Disciplinary Absences (SDAs) comprising short suspensions, long suspensions, expulsions and in some cases, cancellation of enrolment. The department’s Code of School Behaviour outlines obligations and expectations for maintaining order in state schools, including a requirement to record all unacceptable behaviour that results in an SDA.

This report summarises findings from national and international research along with the results of data analysis to identify trends and patterns of SDAs in Queensland state schools.

SDA trends in Queensland state schools 2006-2013

There was an upward trend in the rate of short and long suspensions in Queensland state schools over the period 2006 to 2010, followed by a decline to 2013. The rate of exclusions and enrolment cancellations more than doubled between 2006 and 2013, from 0.6 to 1.3 per 1000 students per term.

![Graph showing SDA incidents per 1000 students per term]

Source: DETE Annual Reports
SDA patterns in Queensland state schools

Findings from the department’s analysis include:

- Approximately 7% of Queensland’s state school students receive at least one SDA each year. Less than 3% receive two or more SDAs.
- Around 96% of SDAs are short or long suspensions.
- The most common school factor associated with SDAs is school type, with secondary schools making more use of SDAs than primary schools. Around half of all SDAs each year are attributed to students in Years 8 to 10.
- SDAs are more commonly associated with students who are male and from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Approximately 61% of the students who receive an SDA each year do not receive a further SDA in that year. However, students who do receive an SDA have a greater probability of receiving a subsequent SDA.

Source: DETE internal analysis
Expanded disciplinary powers

Strengthening school discipline is a key strategy in the Queensland Government’s Great teachers = Great results action plan. Since the start of the 2014 school year, Queensland’s state school principals have had greater disciplinary powers. The Education (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools) Amendment Act 2013 aims to reduce exclusions and suspensions by giving principals more scope to find alternative solutions which are appropriate to students’ individual situations.

The new legislation gives greater flexibility to manage student discipline by using existing and additional tools, including community service and discipline improvement plans. Disciplinary measures are now able to be carried out on non-school days, for example Saturday detentions. Short term suspensions have been extended to up to ten school days and long term suspensions can be up to 20 school days. The Act also expanded the grounds for suspensions and exclusions, for example in relation to students charged with or convicted of a criminal offence.

While principals have been granted more powers under the Act, there are also higher expectations about how they manage student discipline. Schools still have an obligation to provide an education to all students, including those who have been suspended or proposed for exclusion.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion in this report is that SDA trends and patterns are underpinned by complex factors at the student, family, school and community level. A nuanced discussion of student discipline is important to avoid stereotyping or inappropriate policy responses.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on DETE’s approach to student discipline, refer to the ‘Strengthening discipline’ page of the department’s website (http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/strengthening-discipline/)
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Introduction

All Queensland students deserve to learn in classrooms which are free from disruption. Similarly, teachers should be able to work in safe and supportive schools. The Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) is committed to ensuring that all Queensland state schools provide positive and safe learning environments.

Various strategies are used by schools to address student behaviour challenges. This includes detentions and other strategies such as School Disciplinary Absences (SDAs) in the form of suspensions, expulsions and cancellation of enrolment for serious misbehaviour.

Strengthening discipline in Queensland state schools is one of 15 strategies introduced in 2013 under the government’s Great teachers = Great results initiative to lift standards of teaching and give schools more autonomy to provide a safe and supportive learning environment (DETE, 2013a). Principals have been empowered with a wider range of disciplinary powers including Saturday detentions.

This report summarises the results of data analyses to identify historical trends and patterns of SDAs, along with findings from national and international research. The overall conclusion is that SDA usage is underpinned by complex factors at the student, family, school and community level.

School disciplinary powers

There is a long-running community debate about how schools should best respond to student misconduct. From the inception of Queensland’s Education Department in 1876, the management of student misconduct has been governed by legislation and departmental policies and procedures.

Attitudes and responses to school discipline have changed considerably over time in keeping with changing societal norms. Even when allowable under law, the use of corporal punishment was considered a last resort. Corporal punishment in Queensland state schools was abolished in 1995.

Today, student discipline in all Queensland schools is governed by Chapter 12 of the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 (the Act). Part 3 of the Act provides, among other forms of discipline, the power to suspend, exclude or cancel the enrolment of state school students for breach of discipline or other reasons. The department categorises SDAs as:

- Short suspensions – prohibiting a student from attending their school for a nominated period up to 10 school days.¹
- Long suspensions – prohibiting a student from attending their school for a nominated period of between 11 to 20 school days.

¹ Prior to the 2014 school year, the definition of a short suspension was up to five school days but this has now been extended to up to 10 school days. Similarly, long suspensions were previously defined as up to 10 school days but from 2014 these may be up to 20 school days. Results of analysis in this report relate to the pre-2014 definitions.
- Charge-related suspensions – prohibiting a student from attending their school until the charge is dealt with, or if the principal decides to end the suspension before the charge is dealt with on that date.

- Exclusions – prohibits a student from attending certain state schools or all state schools for a nominated period of up to 12 months or permanently.

- Cancellations – enrolment of a post-compulsory age student can be cancelled if the student displays persistent refusal to participate in the program of instruction.

Grounds for imposing a suspension include:

- disobedience or other misbehaviour

- conduct that adversely affects, or is likely to adversely affect, other students

- conduct that adversely affects, or is likely to adversely affect, the good order and management of the school

- the student’s attendance at the school poses an unacceptable risk to the safety or wellbeing of other students or of staff

- the student is charged with a serious offence, or an offence other than a serious offence and it is not in the best interests of other students or staff for the student to attend the school.

The grounds for a charge related exclusion mirror those of suspension, except the student must be convicted of a serious offence and the principal must be reasonably satisfied it would not be in the best interests of students or staff for the student to be enrolled at the school.

From 2014, suspensions and exclusions may be imposed even if the conduct did not happen on school premises or during school hours. Irrespective of the type of misconduct, a principal who suspends a student must take reasonable steps to arrange for the student’s access to an educational program during their suspension. However, if a student is excluded from a state school then their enrolment is taken to be cancelled.

**Departmental policies and Code of School Behaviour**

SDAs are only applied after consideration has been given to other responses. Suspensions, exclusions and cancellations are viewed as only one of many strategies for addressing serious misbehaviour.

The department’s [Safe, Supportive and Disciplined School Environment](#) procedure (DETE, 2014a) sets out the processes by which state schools are to promote a positive learning environment, as outlined in the [Statement of expectations for a disciplined school environment](#) (DETE, 2014b). The procedure includes:

- a requirement for all state schools to have a [Responsible Behaviour Plan for Students](#)

- application, where required, of disciplinary consequences

- provision for the use of ‘time out’ where required to manage student behaviour
• provision for the use of physical restraint in an emergency situation or as part of a student’s behaviour plan while replacement behaviours are taught (e.g. where a student is behaving in a potentially dangerous manner).

Each school determines the behaviour management strategies and disciplinary consequences to suit their context. This may include detentions, SDAs, discipline improvement plans, community service interventions and other responses. The department’s Code of School Behaviour (DETE, 2014c) sets out a fair and consistent standard of behaviour for parents, students and staff across all state schools. The Code is underpinned by the following principles:

• State schools expect high standards of personal achievement and behaviour.

• The foundation of positive classroom behaviour is effective teaching, inclusive and engaging curriculum and respectful relationships between staff and students.

• Positive behaviour is enhanced through a whole school approach and effective school organisation and leadership.

• Partnerships with parents, the wider school community and other support agencies contribute to positive behaviour in schools.

• Staff expertise is valued and developed.

• Standards of expected student behaviour are linked to transparent, accountable and fair processes, interventions and consequences.

• Responses to inappropriate student behaviour must consider both the individual circumstances and actions of the student and the needs and rights of school community members.

The Code of School Behaviour includes a requirement for state schools to record all unacceptable behaviour that results in an SDA.

**Expanded disciplinary powers from 2014**

Strengthening discipline in state schools is a strategy in the Queensland Government’s *Great teachers = Great results* action plan. A theme is to give state school principals more independence and flexibility to use disciplinary measures that meet the specific behavioural needs of students and in consideration of the family and community context.

Since the start of the 2014 school year, Queensland’s state school principals have had greater disciplinary powers as a result of legislative reform. The *Education (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools) Amendment Act 2013* aims to reduce exclusions and suspensions by giving principals more scope to find alternative solutions which are appropriate to students’ individual situations.

The new legislation gives greater flexibility to manage student discipline by using pre-existing and new tools including community service, discipline improvement plans and Saturday detentions. While principals have been granted more powers under the Act, there are also higher expectations about how they manage student discipline. Schools still have an obligation to provide an education to all students, including those who have been suspended or proposed for exclusion.
Also commencing in 2014, regional offices have been directed to work with schools to manage strategies to minimise SDAs as part of a new Regional Operating Framework. In addition, SDAs have been established as a headline indicator as part of the annual School Performance Assessment Framework. All state schools will have a discipline audit from an experienced school principal by the end of 2014 to acknowledge positive approaches to school discipline and identify opportunities for improvement.
SDA patterns and trends

DETE has some of the largest integrated student datasets in the world. Each year approximately 500,000 student records using unique student identifiers are updated and linked to information on demographics, student behaviour and student achievement. These records can also be matched at the school level to a wide range of variables. The department analyses these datasets to provide performance insights, regularly reporting results through its Annual Report, Service Delivery Statement and other publications.

Within this context, Queensland’s state schooling system is in a position to contribute to a broader understanding about behavioural expectations and the role and effectiveness of SDAs. The aim is to provide insights into trends and patterns of SDAs in state schools to complement reporting on student behaviour via the media and other sources. SDA data needs to be interpreted with caution due to the complexity of behaviour management trends and policy responses and the localised contexts that underpin these responses.

Historical trends

This section provides an overview of trends in Queensland state schools’ SDA data over time. Data used for this section are based on aggregated records from the School Disciplinary Absence Collection (SDAC) and subsequently the OneSchool software system. The SDA dataset relates to more than 500,000 enrolled students and more than 1,230 state schools. SDA statistics are published each year online and through the Annual Report. SDA data is analysed after aggregated data has been collated, the 2006 – 2013 data was analysed for this report.

SDA incidents per annum

In any given year, around 96 per cent of SDA incidents are comprised of short and long suspensions, with exclusions and cancellations together making up close to four per cent of total SDA incidents per annum.

The total number of SDA incidents per annum increased from approximately 50,000 in 2006 to 64,000 over the period 2010-2012 and then declined to 62,000 in 2013. This represents an increase in SDA incidents per annum of 24 per cent during 2006-2013 compared to a total enrolment increase of 12 per cent. As a result of this growth trend, the average number of SDA incidents per FTE student increased from 0.11 to 0.12 incidents per student per annum.

During the same period, schools’ use of exclusions and cancellations increased more rapidly than their use of suspensions. In particular, the annual number of enrolment cancellations climbed from 294 incidents in 2006 to 1,413 in 2013; an increase of almost 400 per cent over eight years. These trends are illustrated in the graphs below. Note that there is a complex mix of student behaviour trends, policy reforms and other changes that underpin these overall SDA trends.

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2 The SDAC database was used for recording SDA incidents until Semester 2, 2009. Since then, SDA incidents have been recorded in the OneSchool system and confirmed by school principals. SDAs recorded on OneSchool are accompanied by free text descriptions of the incident including staff and student reports and testimonies.

3 Full-time equivalent (FTE) student totals are reported annually through the ABS’s Schools Australia report and the Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services (ROGS).
SDA incidents per 1000 students per term

An alternative measure which takes into account enrolment growth is the rate of SDA incidents per 1000 students per term. This reveals a similar pattern of initial growth and then decline in the total rate of SDAs, coupled with more rapid growth in the more serious categories of exclusions and cancellations. In particular, the rate of exclusions and enrolment cancellations more than doubled between 2006 and 2013, from 0.6 to 1.3 per 1000 students per term (comprising 0.6 exclusions per 1000 students per term, plus 0.7 cancellations per 1000 students per term).
Patterns

Schools can vary considerably in their application of SDAs, with some opting to apply SDAs to a more narrow range of student behaviour than others. Rates of SDAs need to be interpreted in light of local contexts including school culture and philosophies regarding behaviour management.

While it is important to avoid negative stereotypes, national and international studies do consistently show that students’ age, gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity are all correlated with SDA rates (e.g. Costenbader and Markson, 1998; Taylor and Fairgray, 2005; Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2010).

This section presents results from a point-in-time analysis to identify performance insights from SDA data. The department undertook the analysis in 2012 using predominantly 2010 and 2011 data (subject to data availability for specific analyses). The department continues to collect and analyse these types of data as part of its ongoing corporate performance monitoring and reporting.

SDAs per student per annum

In 2011, approximately 34,000 state school students (7 per cent) received at least one SDA. Of these students, 61 per cent received one SDA in that year and 39 per cent received two or more SDAs. Hence, the number of students receiving two or more SDAs each year is less than three per cent of total enrolments.

Reasons for SDAs

The three most common reasons for SDAs in Queensland state schools are:

- physical misconduct not involving an object
- verbal or non-verbal misconduct
- disruptive behaviour adversely affecting others.

Together these three categories account for around 75 per cent of all SDAs each year. SDAs for more serious offences such as drug use and weapon possession are relatively rare.
School type and other school factors

The department has analysed the relationships between various school factors and SDAs using data for the period 2006 to 2010. The table below shows school level factors considered in relation to SDA rates in this dataset. The strongest relationship in terms of school factors examined was school type, with more students in secondary schools experiencing SDAs compared to primary schools. Once this was controlled for, other school factors were found to have only a weak or negligible partial relationship with SDA rates based on their Beta values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Beta weight</th>
<th>Strength of Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School type (secondary)</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School size</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRSED 2006</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>Very weak to negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal experience</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DETE internal analysis

4 Average school rates for SDAs were arrived at by dividing the number of SDA incidents by every 100 full-time student enrolments for that school. This figure does not reflect the distribution of SDAs across the student population within a school, but does provide a useful method for comparing schools.

5 ‘Beta coefficients’ are estimates derived from statistical analysis that have been standardised to have variances equal to one. Hence, Beta coefficients show how many standard deviations a dependent variable is expected to change in relation to a one standard deviation increase in the explanatory variable.
The annual School Opinion Survey (SOS) for Queensland state schools provides additional insight through measures of ‘school climate’. At the school level, SDA incidents per 100 enrolments were found to be moderately correlated with SOS items relating to student, teacher and parent satisfaction with school climate. In particular, increased rates of SDAs were moderately correlated (ranging from \(|r| = 0.40\) to \(0.55\)) with levels of satisfaction with:

- behaviour of students in the school
- school safety
- student discipline
- workplace health and safety
- physical working conditions at the school.

These results were consistent across student, teacher and parent perceptions of school climate.

### Previous SDAs as a predictor of future SDAs

Findings from a multivariate analysis (refer table below) suggest that, of the factors examined, the student factor most strongly related to the likelihood of having an SDA in 2010 was having a previous SDA incident in that year. Having had a previous SDA during 2010 explained almost half (49%) of the total variance in total SDAs (Beta 0.70; \(p < 0.001\)). Once this factor was controlled for, the partial effect of other student-level variables became negligible. For both primary and secondary students, higher levels of SDAs tend to be more likely among students who have had a previous SDA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Beta weight</th>
<th>Strength of Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previous SDA</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>Very weak to negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>Very weak to negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigeneity</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DETE internal analysis

Providing further support for this finding, longitudinal analyses of Queensland state school attendance data from 2010 suggested that:

- students with very low attendance and a pattern of unauthorised or unexplained absences are more than four times as likely to experience SDAs when compared to their peers
- students that receive SDAs are at greater risk of subsequent non-attendance.

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6 Pearson’s correlation coefficient \((r)\) is a measure of the linear correlation between two variables.

7 Refer DETE (2013b) *Performance Insights: School Attendance.*
**Student age**

The prior observation that school type (secondary) is the largest school-level predictor of SDAs indicates that student age will also be a predictor. The graph below shows the proportion of students in each year level in blue (as a proportion of all enrolments) and the proportion of students who received an SDA in each year level in red (as a proportion of the overall number of students who received an SDA) during 2011. This shows that the proportion of student enrolments at each year level was relatively constant in Queensland state schools up to Year 10 (with the exception of the half-cohort in Year 4 due to introduction of Prep year in 2007), with reduced numbers in Years 11 and 12. In contrast, the proportion of total SDAs peaks between Years 8 to 10, with approximately half of all SDAs occurring within this age band. This is consistent with research focusing on SDAs at secondary school level (e.g. Fabelo et al, 2011).

*Figure 5: SDA prevalence by student age, 2011*

Gender

The graph below illustrates that boys in Queensland state schools are significantly more likely than girls to receive an SDA. As noted by Watts (2010) and other researchers, the existence of a correlation does not necessarily imply a causal relationship. Other risk factors for SDAs include pre-existing anti-social behaviour, low academic achievement and previous SDAs. The observation that males are more likely to receive SDAs is consistent within adolescent patterns of risk-taking and dealing with conflict via physical means (e.g. QSAAV, 2010).

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8 In 2011, males comprised approximately 52 per cent of all Queensland state school students but made up 73 per cent of students who received an SDA.
Socio-economic status

The proportion of students receiving SDAs was analysed in relation to student socio-economic status (SES) using parental education and occupation as proxy measures. Data from 2010 shows a higher rate of SDAs amongst students whose parents had lower levels of school education (Year 9 or below).\(^9\) Similarly, based on available data for 2011, students with SDAs were more likely to have parents who were unemployed or working in manual occupations. Note that parental education and occupation form only part of a variety of inter-related factors that underpin these correlations, such as higher rates of poverty and social exclusion.

\(^9\) The 2011 parental education item featured a substantial proportion (33%) of missing data, hence 2010 data were used. The 2011 parental occupation item also featured substantial missing data (47%).
Table 3: SDA prevalence by parental occupation category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental occupation category</th>
<th>Proportion of students with SDAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior management</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other business managers</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades/office and sales</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine operators/hospitality</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in paid work in last 12 months</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DETE internal analysis

Indigeneity

‘Indigeneity’ refers to students who identify as being Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both. Indigenous students comprised less than nine per cent of all Queensland state school students in 2011 but constituted 18 per cent of students with SDAs. Moreover, a larger proportion of Indigenous students with an SDA had more than one SDA (45%) compared with non-Indigenous students (38%).

These findings aligns with the literature summarised by Michail (2011) and others that shows Indigenous students tend to be over-represented in a wide range of outcomes including SDAs, poor attendance and lower average academic achievement (e.g. Hayes et al, 2009). An over-representation of Indigenous students in SDA data has been reported from all states and territories in Australia (DEEWR, 2010). Overseas research also points to ethnicity and minority status as being a factor in SDA rate (e.g. Taylor and Fairgray, 2005; Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2010). Rates of SDAs are disproportionately high amongst Indigenous students globally, including Māori students (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2011), Native American students (New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, 2010; National Centre for Education Statistics, 2012) and Native Alaskan students (Crumb, 2008).

Although these patterns are of interest, analysis of a range of student factors using 2010 Queensland state schooling data identified that Indigeneity is not correlated with SDAs once other factors such as SES are considered. The implication is that observed correlations between Indigeneity and SDA rates do not necessarily reflect a direct causal link.

Figure 8: Proportion of total SDAs – Indigenous vs non-Indigenous

Source: DETE internal analysis
**SDAs and literacy and numeracy outcomes**

The department’s analysis found that average school SDAs rates were weakly related (Beta -0.25, p <0.05) with average student outcomes as indicated by:

- 2010 NAPLAN performance across the majority of domains (i.e. reading, numeracy, etc.)
- relative gain in NAPLAN reading and numeracy 2008-2010
- 2010 report cards: A to E Results in maths, English and science.

The table below illustrates that increased school SDA rates were only loosely associated with poorer performance on NAPLAN reading, and even less closely associated once socio-demographic variables such as school SES, proportion of Indigenous students and school location were taken into account.

The absence of a strong correlation between SDA rates and student literacy and numeracy outcomes was also found across other NAPLAN domains. This suggests that the relationship between school SDA rates and student outcomes is complex and cannot be isolated through simple school-level correlations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Beta weight</th>
<th>Strength of Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 SDAs per 1000 Enrolments</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 SDAs per 1000 Enrolments</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>Very weak to negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRSED 2006</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>Weak to moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geo-location</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>Negligible to very weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Indigenous</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>Negligible to very weak, negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DETE internal analysis
Notes: (1) Bivariate relationship of SDAs vs (2) multivariate relationship of SDAs (with average NAPLAN reading scores)

**SDAs and student attendance rates**

Unsurprisingly, there is an inverse relationship between SDA rates and student attendance rates. This is partly driven by the use of SDAs for dealing with unexplained absences in some cases; but more substantively due to SDAs being a direct cause of lower student attendance rates. In 2011, students with SDAs had an average attendance rate of 82% compared with 91% for all students.

![Figure 9: Attendance rates of all students versus students with SDAs, 2011](image)

Source: DETE internal analysis
Further research directions

An important element of the analyses in this report is that a substantial amount of total variance in SDAs was not accounted for by the factors analysed. Additional factors which may influence SDA rates include levels of parental and community engagement, school/community resources, the skills of school staff and collaboration between schools (e.g. Riordan, 2006; Michail, 2011). Other relevant factors at the student level include student engagement, aspirations and disability.

In relation to students with disability, a worthwhile line of enquiry may be around students diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), since such students frequently present with challenging behaviour. Another influence not considered in this report is the rate of SDAs associated with students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other learning disabilities.
Literature review summary

Key observations from a review of the literature on student discipline and SDAs are listed as follows.

Behavioural issues are complex

- When young people are asked why they think some students do better than others in school, a common response is that some students don’t really pay attention and are ‘bored’ by school (e.g. Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Although this may be a simplistic response, it does point to the need for schools to ensure they are engaging and relevant for all students.

- Students’ behaviour is ‘... purposeful but not necessarily logical, nor necessarily chosen with a particular set of likely outcomes in mind’ (Joseph, 2010, p 9).

- Holdsworth (2005) noted that if students perceive the curriculum as abstract and unrelated to their existing experience and knowledge, their options are to become either ‘passive collaborators’ or ‘active resisters’. Passive collaborators become inert and disengaged, while active resisters use inappropriate behaviours as part of their disengagement from school.

- ‘Policymakers, educators, parents, and school children ... understand that for schools to provide safe and positive learning environments, there must be rules that govern student conduct. To enforce schools’ rules effectively, they agree that teachers must have the tools, and the discretion to use those tools, to keep order and help students be academically successful.... Less consensus exists, however, on the issues of how, when, and against whom schools’ rules should be enforced’ (Fabelo et al, 2011, p 1).

- ‘Many interventions aimed at preventing student violence are informed by ideology and what seems like ‘common sense’ rather than evidence.... Despite their appeal to some members of the community, research shows that the following approaches to preventing violence in schools do not work ...: Zero tolerance and ‘get tough’ suspensions and exclusions; Rigid control of student behaviour; Belief that students must receive punitive and negative consequences; Increased security measures; Unfair and inconsistent use of discipline; Punishment without support’ (QSAAV, 2010, p 19).

- Determining the most effective behaviour management strategies can be complex given the specific circumstances for each individual student (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2009).

Suspensions and exclusions are a common response to misbehaviour

- ‘The use of suspension as a disciplinary practice is an Australian and international educational, policy and social issue, with evidence for the increased use of suspension from the United Kingdom, United States and to a lesser extent New Zealand’ (Michail, 2011, p 2).

- Scholars have pointed to an increase in school suspensions as a disciplinary practice in many countries over a long period (e.g. Collin and Law, 2001; Fabelo et al, 2011).
‘School suspensions are not always reserved for the worst behaviours, but often used for non-violent or non-threatening conduct such as truancy, talking back to teachers, uniform violations or being late for school’ (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2010, p 5).

‘School exclusion is now becoming an accepted directive for a range of behaviours that are considered to put the school community at risk, such as violence, aggression and increasingly disruption’ (Michail, 2011, p 4).

A small number of key student factors are associated with increased SDAs

Many Australian and international studies have found that gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity are correlated with rates of SDAs (e.g. Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2010). For example, US research by Costenbader and Markson (1998) found that 45% of African American students who responded to the survey reported they had been suspended compared with 12% of other students, and a significantly higher proportion of males reported being suspended compared to females. Other risk factors for SDAs indicated by research include pre-existing anti-social behaviour, academic failure and previous SDAs.

Riordan (2006) notes there are numerous examples of schools that have radically altered their SDA rates, sometimes over a single year, and that schools serving the same communities can have noticeably different suspension rates. This suggests that student factors may play a more important role than school factors.

Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) make the point that parents who come from poorer backgrounds themselves, or have not been successful in education, may lack the practical knowledge that enables them to support their children, for example, having the practical strategies to realise their plans for their future. A lack of support for their child’s engagement with school, possibly demonstrated through student absences and misconduct, may have more to do with some parents failing to see the future relevance of classroom activities and learning than an assumption that education in general does not matter.

Children’s behaviour can become more challenging during adolescence

Many researchers have identified that SDAs occurred at a higher rate in the early and middle high school years. A critical factor is the stage of development of students in Years 8 to 10. It is important to identify young children who require early intervention generally but equally important to distinguish young people whose antisocial behaviour is adolescent-limited (Special Education Division, 2003). The rate of misconduct during adolescence is so high that it is considered by many to be a normal part of teen life (e.g. Deming, 2011).

Joseph (2010) notes that some students who engage in anti-authoritarian behaviour achieve ‘hero’ status for their misconduct and flaunting of rules and social expectations. For those students who are not achieving success in conventional ways, gaining attention and admiration of peers by ‘provoking’ an SDA can become an alternative form of success (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2010). In this regard, Deming (2011) reports that concentrations of high-risk youth can increase overall misbehaviour level.
A considered response is required for managing misbehaviour

- Attempting to stamp out misconduct through tough measures may be counterproductive and could, according to some researchers, increase the appeal of SDAs amongst students of this age range: ‘...this get tough approach is likely to send mixed messages to both the individual and the school community’ (e.g., Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2010, p 4).

- What happens during the period that students are suspended or excluded may be more significant for the student than the SDA incident itself (Michail, 2011). Schools are recognised as playing a protective role. Hemphill and Hargreaves (2010) expressed concern that the process of excluding students from school means that the ‘problem’ is simply shifted from the school to the wider community, leaving unsupervised adolescents free to engage in further anti-social and inappropriate conduct. Hemphill and Hargreaves (2009) found that students who were suspended from school were 50% more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and 70% more likely to engage in violent behaviour. Hayes et al (2009) reported that Indigenous parents had preference for ‘in-school’ suspensions where their child is supervised and given work to do.

- Research examining students’ views on SDAs and on how to address misbehaviour is minimal (Michail, 2011). Costenbader and Markson (1998) conducted a survey of American students in Years 7 and 10 pertaining to discipline at their school, in which students revealed insight into the reasons for the discipline and also the reasons for their misconduct. Bland and Carrington (2009) reported that the process of working with students about their disengagement (for research purposes) resulted in those students becoming engaged in their own educational issues and working with their teachers to find suitable ways for those students to learn.

The media can influence community perceptions of youth behaviour

- An inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) raised the issue of negative community perceptions about young people. It highlighted the tendency to focus disproportionately on those young people who exhibit inappropriate behaviour as a manifestation of a broader ‘anti-youth’ mentality, and to ignore the majority of children or young people with socially appropriate behaviour.

- Some international commentators (e.g. Zinn, 2008) posit that contemporary society generates a culture of fear which can influence interpretations of misbehaviour and shape perceptions about youth engagement in inappropriate behaviour. The risk is that real issues are blown out of proportion and responses are consequently disproportionate and potentially inappropriate.

- Riordan (2006) suggests that a ‘deficit’ model of student misbehaviour, where the student is held to be solely and fully to blame for their situation, underlies calls in the media and the community for tough measures.
SDAs are not always the best response

- Michail (2011) contends that SDAs will not work to change behaviour in those students who are marginalised at school, and are not always appropriate for certain sub-groups of children within the school community. For students who do not want to be at school, an SDA may achieve exactly what the student desires (Hemphill and Hargreaves, 2010).

- Massey et al (2007) suggest that SDAs impact on the broader school community (other students, staff and parents) through disruptions, impacts on the quality of teaching, interruptions to learning and affecting the overall functioning of the school. Michail (2011) states that it is important to consider whether SDAs may actually add to the impact of the misconduct for the whole community.

Guidelines for managing student behaviour and reducing SDAs

- Riordan (2006) conducted interviews with Australian school principals who had reduced the SDA rate at their schools and suggested that school leadership was a critical factor in making this change, particularly attitudes towards:
  - working with parents as partners in their children’s education
  - providing strong reintegration support after an SDA
  - focusing on pedagogy rather than punishment as the means to modify behaviour
  - engaging external support
  - developing and supporting teachers in behaviour management skills.

- Michail (2011, p iii) provides a concise summary review of the literature on school responses to students’ challenging behaviour:

  A number of successful responses to challenging behaviours have been analysed from the literature and a number of common features are evident in programs considered to have reduced students’ challenging behaviour. Firstly, responses need to be multi-tiered. This means at a primary level, preventing the behaviour before it is an issue by working with all students in the school. Intervention at a secondary level, would involve targeting students who might be at risk of exclusion for their behaviour. Interventions at a tertiary level require working intensely with students who have been excluded in some way to keep them engaged with their learning and avoid further exclusion.

  Secondly, responses need to be collaborative. The child, their family and their community all need to be involved in the strategies that are used to modify student behaviour. This accounts for all the contexts in which the child is a part and allows consistency across all the child’s domains. Thirdly, the child requires strong relationships with adults and peers that are familiar with their school environment and learning. Students who have solid rapport with their teachers and other staff at the school, such as counsellors, mental health staff, social workers and mentors are provided with increased opportunities to discuss their behaviour, participate in decisions around how to address their problems and be encouraged to take
responsibility for their actions. Finally, responses based on restorative justice that aim to re-engage the student with their learning after a period of exclusion, hold the student in good stead for successful social and educational outcomes.

There are a range of options for schools to choose from when deciding how to address challenging behaviours in the learning environment. This decision should be made after careful consideration of the evidence for the success of non-punitive measures that consider the whole ecology of the child and focus on the wellbeing of the child. It is essential for students with challenging behaviours to remain engaged with their learning and to be socially included in their school in order that they achieve positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion of this report is that SDA trends and patterns are underpinned by complex factors at the student, family, school and community level. A nuanced discussion of student discipline is important, in order to avoid student stereotyping and the development of inappropriate policy responses. Analysis of Queensland SDA data highlighted that:

- a relatively small proportion of students receive an SDA each year
- SDAs are more frequently used to manage misbehaviour in secondary schools
- SDAs are more commonly associated with students who are male and from lower socio-economic backgrounds, however it is important not to stereotype students and to develop specific responses to suit the circumstances
- the rate of SDAs in Queensland state schools in 2013 was higher than in 2006, particularly in terms of the more serious categories of exclusions and cancellations.

A literature review identified various strategies for managing student behaviour, many of which are already reflected in the department’s policies and procedures. These include:

- working with parents as partners in their children’s education
- providing strong reintegration support after an SDA
- focusing on pedagogy rather than punishment as the means to modify behaviour
- engaging external support
- developing and supporting teachers in behaviour management skills.
References


