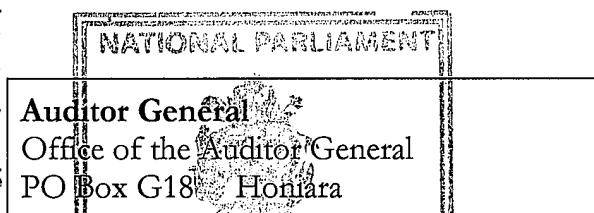


SOLOMON ISLANDS GOVERNMENT

Performance Audit Report

Teacher Absenteeism in Solomon Islands Primary Schools

Printed: 09:09 23-Sep-11



National Parliament Paper No 19 of 2011



Alota'a Primary School, Malaita was visited by the audit team

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Foreword

Background

I have pleasure in presenting this performance audit report of Teacher Absenteeism in Solomon Islands Primary Schools.

The audit was conducted in the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD), as well as in a selection of provincial and independent Education Authorities.

Audit

Fieldwork for the audit was conducted in the period March to June 2011.

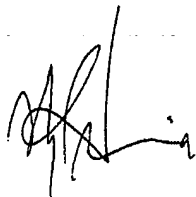
The audit concluded that teacher absenteeism was a significant issue in primary schools and identified a range of causal factors behind the absenteeism, along with areas for improvement in MEHRD and Education Authority management of absenteeism. In particular OAG found the education system organisational and administrative arrangements to be unnecessarily complex and inefficient. Inadequate systems to monitor, report and enforce teacher attendance at primary schools, and environmental factors in the education system such as teacher dissatisfaction with their conditions of service, further exacerbate teacher absenteeism.

I have made a number of recommendations to provide a framework for MEHRD and Solomon Islands Education Authorities to enhance their management of teacher absenteeism in primary schools.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development and his staff; SINTA and its Executive staff; the nine Education Authorities and their respective school head teachers and staff for the support rendered to the Performance Audit Team that enabled the production of this report.

I would like to thank my Performance Audit Team for their commitment and willingness to travel to remote places in the Provinces to interview Education Authorities and schools to collect the necessary information.



Edward Ronia

Auditor General

20 September 2011

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Summary and Recommendations

Solomon Islands education system arrangements

The Solomon Islands national education system has two main structures - a policy and administrative structure and a school structure. The Education Act, 1978 established the policy and administrative structure which has a focus on policy decisions, as well as the organisation and administrative processes of the education system. It is this structure that establishes, supports and develops the school structure. The school structure may be described as the academic and classification structure that divides educational institutions into kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, vocational training centres, colleges and universities.

The education system is subject to the following legislative and regulatory framework:

- The Education Act 1978
- Solomon Islands Teaching Service Handbook (TSH), January 2007
- Education Policy Handbook, February 1997
- Administrative Guide for Provincial Education Officers

The Audit

The objectives of the audit were to:

- review the extent of and reasons behind teacher absenteeism in Solomon Islands primary schools;
- examine the administrative effectiveness of the Solomon Islands education system in managing teacher absenteeism and in modifying education policies and teaching arrangements to minimise absenteeism; and
- identify possible solutions to alleviate teacher absenteeism.

The audit reviewed education arrangements in the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) as well as in nine Education Authorities: Guadalcanal, Honiara City Council, Malaita, Central, Makira, Isabel, Seventh Day Adventist Church, South Seas Evangelical Church and the Church of Melanesia.

The opening interview was held at MEHRD on 25 February 2011 and audit fieldwork was undertaken at MEHRD headquarters in Honiara and at Education Authorities and primary schools in the provinces, over the period March to June 2011. The audit team also consulted with the Solomon Islands Teachers Association (SINTA).

Conclusions and recommendations

The audit concluded that teacher absenteeism was a significant issue in primary schools and found the Solomon Islands education system's organisational and administrative arrangements to be unnecessarily complex and inefficient. Inadequate systems to monitor, report and enforce teacher attendance at primary schools, and environmental factors in the education system such as teacher dissatisfaction with their conditions of service and the late return of teachers at the beginning of the academic year, further exacerbate teacher absenteeism. Poor transport, banking and communications infrastructure results in further teacher absenteeism from schools.

OAG conservatively estimates that the opportunity cost of lost teacher wages due to absenteeism exceeds \$12.2m pa. Aside from the cost in dollars, the long-term impact upon the education of children should not be under-estimated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the motivation and drive of children to attend school and to learn can be severely impacted when their teachers are frequently absent. Also if teachers are seen to treat coming to school as something that is not important, young children can quickly develop the same attitude.

Key audit findings by chapter

Chapter 2 Education System Governance Arrangements

OAG found the education system organisational and administrative arrangements to be unnecessarily complex and slow to process teacher conditions of service matters.

Inadequate systems exist to monitor, report and enforce teacher attendance at primary schools.

There has been a failure to collect accurate absenteeism data at primary schools in the provinces and inadequate teacher attendance management information is held by the Ministry and Education Authorities for them to fully understand the extent of the problem.

Education institutions have also failed to undertake sufficient inspection activities at schools.

Chapter 3 Causal factors behind teacher absenteeism

Environmental factors in the education system which have exacerbated teacher absenteeism include:

- teacher dissatisfaction with their conditions of service;
- an inappropriate attitude of many teachers in regard to unauthorised absences from school;
- the need for strong leadership by Head Teachers to monitor and enforce teacher attendance;

- the late return of teachers at the beginning of the academic year; and
- the need to foster community support to primary schools and for Education Authorities to support their schools.

Chapter 4 Factors external to the education system

OAG noted that the poor banking infrastructure in the provinces exacerbates the length of time that teachers are away on paydays.

A shortage of teacher housing at schools means that teachers may have long distances to travel to school - this results in many coming late to school, particularly in bad weather.

Poor transport and communications infrastructure means that teachers waste a significant amount of time travelling to see their Education Authority or the Ministry to deliver documentation or to resolve issues, resulting in further absenteeism from school.

Recommendations

Recommendation No. 1 (section 2.6.12)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should:

- a) simplify its organisational structures wherever possible;
- b) review the necessity of all current Education Authorities; and
- c) give serious consideration to the possibility of streamlining the education system by centralising responsibility for all education matters in a single ministry.

Recommendation No. 2 (section 2.6.18)

OAG recommends that MEHRD and the Education Authorities should place greatly increased emphasis on appropriate resourcing and streamlining of administrative processes for resolving teacher conditions of service matters.

Recommendation No. 3 (section 2.6.24)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should collect accurate absenteeism data across all provinces in order to fully understand the extent of the teacher absenteeism problem and to highlight areas most requiring corrective action.

Recommendation No. 4 (section 2.6.31)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should enforce a policy whereby all schools maintain an accurate and complete register of daily attendance by all teachers and that the actual time teachers spend working at school each day be recorded.

Recommendation No. 5 (section 2.6.37)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should:

- a) enforce a policy whereby all schools are required to report fortnightly to the relevant Education Authority on unauthorised teacher absences;
- b) ensure that Education Authorities act on the absence reports and forward their decisions to MEHRD; and
- c) act on the absence reports by withholding teacher salaries for unauthorised periods of absence from school.

Recommendation No. 6 (section 2.6.42)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should fully resource its Inspectorate and Advisory Services Division and that it should endeavour to complete a full cycle of school inspections each year.

Recommendation No. 7 (section 2.6.49)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should undertake the following policy review actions:

- a) amend section 11.4.1 of the Teaching Service Handbook to require all primary schools to record the actual time teachers spend at school;
- b) revise the policy on the payment of teacher's annual leave travel expenses to reflect any changed responsibilities and amend section 13.1.2 of the Teaching Service Handbook accordingly;
- c) OAG recommends that arrangements for payment of Teachers Travel Allowances be appropriately identified well in advance each year to ensure that teachers are paid only their entitlement in a timely manner and that appropriate controls be enforced including:
 - Establishing an appropriate disbursement method which ensures that the intended recipients receive their entitlement
 - Making alternative arrangements for distributing the moneys other than through individual officers personal accounts
 - Verifying entitlements and formulating the annual budget well before Christmas vacation period commences
- d) undertake steps to provide a more equitable receipt by teachers of allowances paid by different Education Authorities and clarify responsibilities for the provision of the various allowances to teachers in the Teaching Service Handbook;
- e) tighten the requirements of the compassionate leave policy and reinforce its requirements with all Education Authorities and Head Teachers, particularly in respect of the period of leave and the interpretation of an immediate family member; and

- f) ensure that all primary schools and new teachers have access to an up-to-date copy of the Teaching Service Handbook.

Recommendation No. 8 (section 3.4.9)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should foster a professional culture in teachers and ensure that those teachers without a professional qualification are provided with supplementary training which covers their ethical responsibilities.

Recommendation No. 9 (section 3.4.19)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should enforce a policy whereby all teachers must return to their schools in time to commence classes at the beginning of week one in each academic year.

Recommendation No. 10 (section 4.2.5)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should initiate discussions with the banking sector to expand its banking service in the provinces and should actively pursue the feasibility of sending out pay teams to some of the more remote areas, to reduce the need for teachers to travel long distances to collect their pay.

Recommendation No. 11 (section 4.3.4)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should provide supplementary funding for the construction of additional teacher housing at those schools most in need and help coordinate the construction of teacher housing with local communities.

Recommendation No. 12 (section 4.4.5)

OAG recommends that MEHRD should initiate a dialogue with the Ministry of Infrastructure Development to improve the transport and communications infrastructure requirements of schools.

Summary of Ministry response

The Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development agreed with all the recommendations and noted that this audit report focuses on management and administration matters and suggests that the causes of teacher absenteeism are much wider than that, and needs wider-ranging solutions than those offered in the recommendations. The OAG agrees and notes that the wider environmental issues are well outside the scope of an audit such as this. The OAG, however, considers that addressing the management and administration matters should mitigate the impact of these wider issues to some extent and believes that our recommendations, if implemented will go some way towards doing this.

Ministry Response to the Report

The response by the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development is reproduced in full below:

Good clear report and we agree with most of the recommendations, though we think that the report presents teacher absenteeism mainly as an administrative and management problem. However, teacher absenteeism is far more complex than it seems in first instance.

In the latest Annual Joint Review July 20 and 21, we discussed this as in a more comprehensive manner. Many factors and actors play a role in the causes of teacher absenteeism. Motivation is one of the main causes and this is dependent on a mix of factors such as low salary, late payments, administrative problems, no career perspective or encouragement from the education and public service system to perform better, few opportunities for in-service training, difficult living and working conditions in the rural areas, distance etc. This means as long as these causes are not seriously tackled, it would be almost impossible to improve teacher attendance. But yes, the administrative and supporting mechanisms to encourage a teacher to perform better are within our control, but not the general living and working conditions for most teachers. We therefore think, teacher absenteeism needs a more comprehensive, joint and creative approach in which different Ministries (such as Public Service, Provincial Government, Finance), Education Authorities, schools and teachers and community members should all actively involve themselves. This almost needs an awareness and mobilization of the whole country. Only administrative solutions will not work.

A few new and alternative approaches could be the following:

- Start an experiment in a few schools that are allowed to address the problem themselves. Reward those schools with the best solutions and education results.

- Allow head teachers and school boards to set their own locally-appropriate timetables which can take account of all the other things that teachers need to do with their time in that environment under the condition that the school takes full responsibility for delivering the syllabus and preparing students for the national tests.
- Organise a simple campaign. Start talking to the absentees about this and tell them that we know what's going on and ask them for the best solutions. Utilise radio, newspapers and organise a national debate to bring this negative behaviour into the public eye and encourage communities to set higher expectations, find solutions and provide better support to the teachers of their children.
- Some IT-solutions might be piloted as well. The use of mobile phones by Education Authorities and school committees/boards to collect attendance reports on a daily basis. Even the payment of teacher salaries could be transferred to 'mobile wallets' in their phones. This technology is already in the villages in Malaita and elsewhere, is owned by the stakeholders - parents and teachers - and is simple to use.

MEHRD Reactions to the Recommendations

The MEHRD response to the individual recommendations is provided in the table below.

<p>Recommendation No. 1</p> <p>OAG recommends that MEHRD should</p> <p>d) simplify its organisational structures wherever possible;</p> <p>e) review the necessity of all current Education Authorities; and</p> <p>f) give serious consideration to the possibility of streamlining the education system by centralising responsibility for all education matters in a single ministry.</p>	<p>Agreed with recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Ministry is already implementing its education sector structure review (ESSR); 4 pilots supported by a Change Manager will be implemented to improve education services by selected Education Authorities (EA's). • List of performance criteria to be provided to all EA's. • Sufficient funds and facilities need to be provided to EA's, not only from central government but also from provincial government <p>Within the ESSR strengthening of the Makira & Western province</p>
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	<p>and SSEC & COM Church Authority's will take place. The Ministry will base its decision to (de)centralise on the capacity of EA's and actual performance of EA's. The general aim is to decentralize and gradually hand over more responsibilities to EA's which are capable to reduce the work load of Teacher Service Division (TSD), but where capacity is inadequate TSD will maintain its role in teacher recruitment , payment and budgeting.</p>
<p>Recommendation No. 2</p> <p>OAG recommends that MEHRD and the Education Authorities should place greatly increased emphasis on appropriate resourcing and streamlining of administrative processes for resolving teacher conditions of service matters.</p>	<p>Agreed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRD/Admin division plans to undertake more visits to all provincial education authorities in 2012 • HRD/Admin division will organise trainings on Code of Conduct, staff appraisals, computer training in provincial EA's • Change Managers (international and local) are recruited to strengthen at least 4 piloted areas in particular in the area of teacher management • Documentation is needed from school level (school committees, boards) to EA's on teacher performances. This is already part of new policies to support the Inspectorate.
<p>Recommendation No. 3</p> <p>OAG recommends that MEHRD should collect accurate absenteeism data across all provinces in order to fully understand the extent of the teacher absenteeism problem and to highlight areas most requiring corrective action.</p>	<p>Agree with recommendations</p> <p>The Ministry will announce to all EA's:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2-Weekly collection of teacher attendance data by EA's from all schools ○ Monthly summary reports to be submitted by EA's to

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	<p>TSD/Ministry.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry and EA's must act on most serious cases
<p>Recommendation No. 4</p> <p>OAG recommends that MEHRD should enforce a policy whereby all schools maintain an accurate and complete register of daily attendance by all teachers and that the actual time teachers spend working at school each day be recorded.</p>	<p>Agree with recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue of attendance register already captured in Teaching Service Handbook (TSHB). Actions to be taken by EA's after every 15th days, including on the accumulated absenteeism up to 15 days as stated in TSHB. (dismissal).
<p>Recommendation No. 5</p> <p>OAG recommends that MEHRD should:</p> <p>d) enforce a policy whereby all schools are required to report fortnightly to the relevant Education Authority on unauthorised teacher absences;</p> <p>e) ensure that Education Authorities act on the absence reports and forward their decisions to MEHRD; and</p> <p>f) act on the absence reports by withholding teacher salaries for unauthorised periods of absence from school.</p>	<p>Agree with recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Permanent Secretary to inform all teachers regarding the teacher absenteeism issues raised through a Press Statement. EA's will be monitored by MEHRD on their adherence to monthly submit summarized attendance reports to TSD/Ministry. MEHRD can withdraw right of EA's in cases of non-performance. Agreed; TSDs and in good coordination with EA's which are the employers will follow up on most serious cases and report this to payroll staff in Ministry of Finance and Treasury.

<p>Recommendation No. 6</p> <p>OAG recommends that MEHRD should fully resource its Inspectorate and Monitoring Division and that it should endeavour to complete a full cycle of school inspections each year.</p>	<p>Agree on recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact visits to schools are now tasked to EA's • Ministry expects also collaboration from Ministry of Public Service to allow for the recruitment of some extra staff for the Inspectorate • The Inspectorate should focus on meeting clear targets and increase the number of visits, assessments and whole school evaluations. School committees/boards, head teacher and principals are now already part of this inspectorate system and have a clear role in monitoring and reporting on teacher attendance. • Professional Divisions in the Ministry (such as for ECE, Primary, Secondary, TVET) should prioritise the monitoring of teacher attendance and assist the Inspectorate.
<p>Recommendation No. 7</p> <p>OAG recommends that MEHRD should undertake the following policy review actions:</p> <p>g) amend section 11.4.1 of the Teaching Service Handbook to require all primary schools to record the actual time teachers spend at school;</p> <p>h) revise the policy on the payment of teacher's annual leave travel expenses to reflect any changed responsibilities and amend section 13.1.2 of the Teaching Service Handbook accordingly;</p> <p>i) OAG recommends that</p>	<p>Agree with recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation will take place soon with all EA's (both church, private & public) to look at all issues from (a – e) • TSHBK review currently in progress and will include most of the recommendations proposed • Policies and interim agreement with SINTA (for 50% SIG and 50% EA-support) need to be discussed and revised (item for consultation with EA's) • EA's to meet performance criteria for setting up and

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<p>arrangements for payment of Teachers Travel Allowances be appropriately identified well in advance each year to ensure that teachers are paid only their entitlement in a timely manner and that appropriate controls be enforced including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing an appropriate disbursement method which ensures that the intended recipients receive their entitlement • Making alternative arrangements for distributing the moneys other than through individual officers personal accounts • Verifying entitlements and formulating the annual budget well before Christmas vacation period commences <p>j) undertake steps to provide a more equitable receipt undertake steps to provide a more equitable receipt by teachers of allowances paid by different Education Authorities and clarify responsibilities for the provision of the various allowances to teachers in the Teaching Service Handbook;</p> <p>k) tighten the requirements of the compassionate leave policy and reinforce its requirements with all Education Authorities and Head Teachers, particularly in respect of the period of leave and the interpretation of an immediate family</p>	<p>managing a professional education office with clear responsibilities for teacher management (they are the employer). The PS of MEHRD holds the right to de-register those EA's that don't perform and don't meet the performance criteria (see recommendation 1).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreed; however this needs strong collaboration with EA's who are employers • Legal definition of entitlements needs to be sought from AGC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreed, there should be stricter monitoring by EA's on the adherence to TSHB-regulations on this matter. • Ministry will tighten the rules on this matter in the revised TSHB.
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<p>member; and l) ensure that all primary schools and new teachers have access to an up-to-date copy of the Teaching Service Handbook.</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p>Recommendation No. 8 OAG recommends that MEHRD and EA's should foster a professional culture in teachers and ensure that those teachers without a professional qualification are provided with supplementary training which covers their ethical responsibilities.</p>	<p>Agree with recommendation for both MEHRD & EA's</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short in service trainings/refresher courses to be scheduled during term breaks • Induction trainings to be undertaken by MEHRD's professional divisions for teachers at SoE • Train all EA's in these matters • SoE to take on board – professional studies in the pre-service training.
<p>Recommendation No. 9 OAG recommends that MEHRD and EA's should enforce a policy whereby all teachers must return to their schools in time to commence classes at the beginning of week one in each academic year.</p>	<p>Agree with recommendation for both MEHRD and EA's</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirmation of posting to be concluded by end of year by EA's • Teachers to be at school a week before academic year starts. • Attendance forms should include start before academic year and also continue to be filled in precisely for periods after examinations (SISE, SIF3, SISC). • These agreements will be part of the revised TSHB.
<p>Recommendation No. 10 OAG recommends that MEHRD should initiate</p>	<p>Agree with recommendation, however</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Secretary to follow-up with

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<p>discussions with the banking sector to expand its banking service in the provinces and should actively pursue the feasibility of sending out pay teams to some of the more remote areas, to reduce the need for teachers to travel long distances to collect their pay.</p>	<p>Ministers(Ministerial level) and Permanent Secretaries to collaborate with MoFT, MPGIS, MPS & RDIA on this financial service and banking issue</p>
<p>Recommendation No. 11 OAG recommends that MEHRD should provide supplementary funding for the construction of additional teacher housing at those schools most in need and help coordinate the construction of teacher housing with local communities.</p>	<p>Agrees with recommendation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-sharing between EA's & Community and central government in the provision of teacher housing need to be re-established and strengthened by policies, annual work programmes and good communication between the different actors. • Roles & responsibilities in this matter to be shared with Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening (MPGIS), MDP (Ministry of Development Planning) and Ministry of Infrastructure Development (MID) • Provinces should prioritise teachers 'most in need ' and to include these projects in annual work or provincial education action plans and link these to budgets and funding from different resources
<p>Recommendation No. 12 OAG recommends that MEHRD should initiate a dialogue with the Ministry of Infrastructure</p>	<p>Agree with recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue is indeed needed and joint planning with MID & MEHRD

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Development to improve the transport and communications infrastructure requirements of schools.	
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Audit Findings and Conclusions

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The Auditor General, pursuant to the provisions of section 108 of the Constitution, as read with sections 35(1)(d), 35(1)(e) and 39(3) of the Public Finance and Audit Act [Cap 120], has authorised the staff of the Office of the Auditor General to conduct this performance audit of Teacher Absenteeism in Solomon Islands (SI) Primary Schools.

1.1.2 The Ministry of Finance and Treasury (MoFT) has requested that OAG conduct this performance audit of SI teacher absenteeism. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) is supportive of the audit. The topic of teacher absenteeism was selected as it directly impacts on the effectiveness of education activities in SI primary schools.

1.2 Audit methodology

1.2.1 The audit focused on identifying the extent of and reasons behind teacher absenteeism in SI primary schools and on possible solutions to alleviate absenteeism. The audit examined the administrative effectiveness of the SI education system in managing teacher absenteeism and in modifying teaching arrangements and policies to minimise absenteeism. The audit also considered the overarching legislative framework and relevant administrative guidelines impacting on the management of teacher absenteeism.

1.2.2 OAG developed best practice criteria for the following areas: the SI education system's approach to managing teacher absenteeism; causal factors of absenteeism within the education system (e.g. conditions of service, education system organisational frameworks, teacher professionalism, and the control and direction of teacher workloads); and external causal factors (e.g. financial, infrastructure, community and cultural influences). The audit conclusions in this report were based on the findings of audit fieldwork when considered against these criteria.

1.2.3 OAG fieldwork involved interviewing relevant personnel within MEHRD, Education Authorities and schools, reviewing available files, considering relevant research material, electronic media and documentation, as well as analysing available data on teacher absenteeism.

2. Education System Governance Arrangements

2.1 Background

2.1.1 This chapter considers the linkages between the different Solomon Islands education structures, as well as the bureaucratic processes and coordination systems in place to monitor and manage teacher absenteeism. It describes OAG's conclusions on the organisational and governance arrangements of the education system, in regard to teacher absenteeism. The findings were generated after reviews of documentation and extensive interviews from a range of sources across the Solomon Island's educational system.

Audit criteria

2.1.2 OAG considers that MEHRD and the Education Authorities should have efficient and well coordinated systems in place which operate to ensure that teachers attend school in accordance with their conditions of employment.

2.2 National Education Board

2.2.1 The National Education Board (NEB) was established under section 4(1) of the Education Act 1978. The functions of the Board are to:

- advise the Minister on matters concerning the operation and development of the Solomon Islands education system;
- make recommendations to the Minister on matters of education policy; and
- advise the Minister on matters concerning the financing of education services.

2.2.2 The NEB membership comprises of a chairman and other members appointed by the Minister of Education, ten of whom represent the Education Authorities, at least one to represent the interests of teachers, at least one to represent the Minister of Home Affairs, at least one to represent commercial interests in the Solomon Islands and the MEHRD Chief Education Officer.

2.2.3 OAG found that the NEB mainly deliberates on education policy and other higher level matters such as deciding over applications for Education Authorities. As such, OAG was advised that the NEB is not specifically concerned with teacher absenteeism.

2.3 Teaching Service Commission

2.3.1 The Constitution (Amendment) Act 1982 established the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) and provided its powers and functions in the appointment, promotion and discipline of

teachers employed within the Solomon Islands national education system. The Commission's responsibilities and powers in regard to the discipline and removal of teachers from the teaching service, therefore give it a direct role to play in minimising teacher absenteeism.

2.3.2 The Chairman of the Public Service Commission is also Chairman of the Teaching Service Commission. The TSC's members are drawn from the general public and not less than two or more than three must be appointed by the Governor General. The TSC's members must not be public officers or members of political associations. The Teaching Service Office, within MEHRD's Teaching Service Division, acts as the secretariat and administrative support office of the TSC. It is responsible for:

- maintaining and reviewing the Register of Teachers;
- issuing teacher Registration Certificates;
- monitoring and dealing with teacher salary payments;
- managing the teacher establishment;
- maintaining administrative links with Education Authorities and teacher associations; and
- implementing approved policy matters and carrying out decisions of the TSC.

2.3.3 OAG held discussions with the Teaching Service Commissioners. The Commissioners noted that their work focused on: the confirmation of teacher appointments; teacher qualifications and registration; and teacher discipline. The commission has the power to deregister and terminate the employment of a teacher if the teacher is absent from work for 15 consecutive days without good reason. The commission makes its judgement based on the facts of each individual case and on the recommendation of the relevant Education Authority.

2.3.4 The Commission highlighted several problems with the current system - they considered that most absenteeism is not reported to Education Authorities and that even when it is reported the administrative process is very slow before any actions are resolved. They stressed the need for a streamlining of administrative systems and for improved communication between schools and their Education Authorities, and also between the Authorities and MEHRD's Teaching Service Division.

2.4 MEHRD responsibilities

2.4.1 The Education Act, 1978 established a policy and administrative structure of which MEHRD is a central component. Section 3 of the Act states that there shall be a ministry responsible for education and training which shall

consist of a Minister, a Permanent Secretary and such subordinate officers as may from time to time be appointed.

2.4.2 The Ministry receives directions from the government through the Minister and its primary functions involve:

- planning for and implementation of government education policy;
- administration and coordination of education activities such as budgeting and grants, curriculum materials and exams, collecting and analysing data, liaising with Education Authorities, and the promotion and transfer of teachers; and
- regulatory functions including the registration and deregistration of teachers, the inspection and discipline of teachers, and the withdrawal of approval from an Education Authority.

2.4.3 OAG held discussions with senior ministry officials in several key areas. The primary areas of the Ministry with responsibilities relating to teacher absenteeism include the Teaching Service Division, the Inspectorate Division and the Primary Education Division. At the time of audit, total MEHRD staffing exceeded 300.

2.4.4 MEHRD's Teaching Service Division (TSD) is responsible for administering the functions of the Teaching Service Commission and those functions laid down in the Education Act, 1978 relating to teachers. The Division is referred to as the Teaching Service Office (TSO) in the Teaching Service Handbook, 2007 and its functions are spelt out in section 2.3 of the TSH. These duties include:

- acting as a secretariat for and carrying out the decisions of the Commission;
- implementing ministry policies relating to teachers;
- facilitating matters relating to teacher salaries;
- coordinating employment and conditions of service matters with relevant ministry divisions and with Education Authorities;
- maintaining a Register of Teachers;
- developing a national teacher scheme of service; and
- registering and deregistering teachers.

2.4.5 The Inspectorate and Advisory Services Division (IASD) in the Ministry is responsible for implementing section 19 of the Education Act, 1978. This section provides for inspections to be made on educational grounds of all schools in the Solomon Islands. The types of inspection undertaken include:

- Contact visit – a brief visit normally carried out two weeks after the commencement of the school term in order to witness a school's commencement and the presence of the teachers.
- Advisory visit – this focuses on the curriculum being taught, the teaching being undertaken and the overall school circumstances. Conducted in a minimum of two visits a year, it results in a report to MEHRD, the Education Authority and the school.
- School inspection – this activity monitors the programs and standards set by MEHRD and advises the relevant Ministry division of any deficiencies and progress being made towards resolution.
- Personal inspection – this visit focuses on individual teachers for promotional purposes and only occurs on the recommendation of the Education Authority and the Teaching Service Division.

2.4.6 MEHRD's Primary Education Division is responsible for all registered primary schools in regard to school registration, analysis of attendance returns, budgets, teacher training needs, communication with and advice to provincial education officers, and developing plans and strategies for improving the primary school sector.

2.4.7 The Implementation and Planning Unit of the Ministry addresses serious shortcomings of the education system by providing management capacity for major projects, collecting data, conducting studies and system analysis, and developing strategies for improving the system. The OAG was informed that the unit focuses on infrastructure projects and therefore has not undertaken any specific projects relating to teacher absenteeism.

2.5 Education Authority processes

2.5.1 Education Authorities are the employers of teachers and are responsible for advertising vacant posts, the selection process and appointment of teachers. They are also responsible for notifying the Teaching Service Commission (through MEHRD's Teaching Service Division) of any vacancies existing in schools and for keeping them informed of all matters relating to the placement and performance of teachers. These responsibilities are spelt out in section 2.4 of the TSH.

2.5.2 The funding to operate Education Authority primary schools comes from several sources including central government grants to the provincial governments (administered by the Ministry of Provincial Government), aid donor grants, independent Education Authority grants, donations, fund raising and school fees paid by parents.

2.5.3 OAG fieldwork was conducted in nine Education Authorities: Guadalcanal; Honiara City Council; Malaita; Central; Makira; Isabel; Seventh Day Adventist Church; South Seas Evangelical Church; and the Church of Melanesia. Together these nine authorities administer over 450 primary schools (over 70% of all the primary schools in the Solomons) and employ 74% of the primary school teachers.

2.5.4 OAG identified a range of matters in Education Authorities contributing to teacher absenteeism. These issues generally revolved around the slow or ineffective administrative systems employed by many of the authorities. These issues are further described in the following section.

2.6 Governance issues affecting teacher absenteeism

2.6.1 OAG fieldwork highlighted a number of organisational and administrative issues in regard to the management by education institutions of teacher absenteeism. These included:

- unnecessarily complex organisational arrangements;
- ineffective administrative systems – in particular the failure to process teacher conditions of service matters in a timely manner;
- the failure to collect accurate absenteeism data across all provinces, in order to fully understand the extent of the problem;
- poor systems for monitoring, reporting and enforcing teacher attendance;
- inadequate teacher attendance management information held by the Ministry and Education Authorities;
- failure of the education institutions to undertake sufficient inspection activities at schools; and
- the need to further develop education policy.

Unnecessarily complex organisational arrangements

2.6.2 Organisational arrangements in the Solomon Islands education system are very complex. The Teaching Service Commission is vested with powers relating to the appointment, promotion and discipline of teachers. MEHRD is the ministry at the head of the education policy and administrative structure with wide responsibilities for education and training matters, including involvement through its TSD and IASD divisions with the promotion and discipline of teachers. MEHRD (in concert with the Ministry of Finance and Treasury) is responsible for the payment of teacher salaries. Education Authorities employ teachers and are responsible for selecting, appointing and disciplining them. The Education Authorities are responsible for

the payment of allowances to teachers, yet salaries (and some allowances) are paid for by the central government.

2.6.3 Coordination issues between MEHRD, the Education Authorities and schools abound – at the school level this is often due to poor communications infrastructure, where many schools have neither telephone nor email services available, and at the ministry and authority level it is more of an issue relating to poorly developed administrative systems and inadequate resourcing.

2.6.4 Of the 24 Education Authorities with primary schools, ten are government run (one each for the nine provinces plus Honiara City Council). The other 14 authorities are privately run institutions, nine of which are religious organisations and five of which support independent schools. Seven of the privately run authorities operate only one primary school each, while two authorities administer two primary schools each. There is significant duplication of administrative structures in the Solomon Islands education system.

2.6.5 OAG fieldwork highlighted that one of the major issues impeding the effective operation of the Education Authorities is that they are invariably poorly resourced. This was evident in the small number of administrative staff in their employ and the significant level of complaints from teaching staff in relation to the ability of the authorities to administer teacher conditions of service matters.

2.6.6 Under the current arrangements Education Authorities are responsible for the provision of allowances for teaching staff. (refer High Court judgement HC-CC 225 of 2000, Church of Melanesia Trust Board Incorporated v Attorney-General). This responsibility includes accommodation allowances (where school housing is not provided) and the annual 'leave passage' allowance, provided to allow teachers to return to their villages at the end of the academic year.

2.6.7 The extent to which the teachers receive these allowances, however, depends on the funding available to each authority. In past years, authority budgets have not been sufficient to pay teachers their annual leave travel expenses (also known as the 'leave passage' allowance). Under a 2007 MOU between MEHRD and SINTA, the Ministry and the Education Authorities were each to pay half the cost of the 'leave passage' allowance. A Joint Consultative Committee was also to be established to formulate mechanisms to address the issue of annual leave travel expenses. But OAG was advised by many teachers that their Education Authorities still failed to provide the full amount of the remaining allowance. Because Education Authorities distribute allowances to teachers in varying amounts, inequities abound - for example, no accommodation allowances were paid to teachers in Makira and Central Province last year.

2.6.8 Section 10 of the Education Act sets out criteria for the approval of an Education Authority and states that the Minister shall not approve an organisation to become an Education Authority unless sufficient information is supplied to satisfy:

- after receiving advice from the NAB, that there is a genuine need for the proposed authority to operate schools;
- that the proposed authority has sufficient resources and facilities available for the satisfactory operation of their schools; and
- that the proposed authority can competently administer the schools.

2.6.9 Section 11 of the Education Act requires the Minister to withdraw approval for an Education Authority if it fails to comply with these requirements. OAG fieldwork highlighted numerous examples in the Education Authorities of ineffective administrative practices in relation to teachers and inadequate levels of resourcing applied to these processes. It is not obvious to OAG that Education Authorities are either sufficiently well resourced or sufficiently competent to employ teachers or to manage schools. This raises serious questions as to whether the Solomon Islands model of decentralised Education Authorities (as employers of teachers) reporting to a central Ministry is working.

2.6.10 In OAG discussions with the Solomon Islands Teachers Association, SINTA proposed returning to a more centralised education system with a single ministry responsible for all education matters. Such an administrative reorganisation could only be achieved by amending the legislation to allow the ministry to become the employer of teachers and to abolish the role of the Education Authorities. Such a course of action would, no doubt, result in some resistance from the independent authorities.

2.6.11 OAG concluded, however, that the education system was unnecessarily complex and overly bureaucratic - as such, it was inherently inefficient. OAG considers that MEHRD should: simplify its organisational structures wherever possible; review the necessity of all current Education Authorities; and give serious consideration to the possibility of streamlining the education system by centralising responsibility for all education matters in a single ministry. Under this model the functions of the Education Authorities could be taken over by an enhanced TSO, sufficiently resourced to operate branches in the provinces.

Recommendation No. 1

2.6.12 OAG recommends that MEHRD should:

- a) simplify its organisational structures wherever possible;
- b) review the necessity of all current Education Authorities; and

- c) give serious consideration to the possibility of streamlining the education system by centralising responsibility for all education matters in a single ministry.

Ineffective administrative systems

2.6.13 During OAG fieldwork at primary schools, many comments were made that MEHRD and the Education Authorities neglect teachers and do not respond in a timely manner to their concerns. Numerous instances were noted where teachers complained of delays in processing conditions of service matters at both the Education Authority and Ministry levels. This included processing of salary amendments and promotions. At several schools there were instances of teachers attending school but not having been paid for the entire academic year (at the time of audit fieldwork this was a period of over four months work without being paid). This was despite numerous attempts by these teachers to have their pay commenced. This often occurs when teachers transfer between Education Authorities, due to the poor communication between Authorities. Equally, there was anecdotal evidence of teachers not bothering to come to school, yet still getting paid.

2.6.14 An issue also exists in regard to the communication of administrative requirements and the resolution of conditions of service matters between the Education Authorities and MEHRD. One Education Authority noted that it had submitted 73 promotion and salary submissions for action by the Ministry at the beginning of the academic year, but they were still outstanding some four months later. At the time of audit fieldwork, MEHRD advised that the TSD had a staff of only 14, of which six were responsible for processing salary and promotions matters.

2.6.15 OAG was also advised of teachers having to come to Honiara from the provinces as the only way of resolving disputes with their Education Authorities or with MEHRD and in other cases of having to wait for years for confirmation of promotions. These unnecessary administrative delays are extremely frustrating for teachers to resolve and only serve to undermine teacher commitment. In turn they are a significant contributor to teacher absenteeism. Teachers from the more remote provinces may be absent from school for a week or more when they travel to Honiara to resolve such issues with MEHRD.

2.6.16 The issue of poorly administered and resourced systems at all levels in the education sector contributes to undermining teachers desire to attend school and is thus directly responsible for exacerbating teacher absenteeism. Inefficient administrative systems, such as those highlighted above, lead to:

- individuals being able to manipulate the system – if teachers know that there will be no consequences if they are absent

from school, then some will take advantage of the system by attending to other personal matters rather than coming to school, knowing that they will still get paid;

- teachers often needing to resolve issues relating to their pay, promotions, probation and performance assessment by physically going to see education officials, either in their provincial capital or to see ministry officials in Honiara. Although teachers may well have sent letters, lodged forms or sent emails to the appropriate authorities, often no action is taken until they complain in person; and
- teachers becoming disillusioned and demotivated by the continual problems that they face with the Solomon Islands education bureaucracy.

2.6.17 OAG concluded that administrative systems in the various educational organisations were unnecessarily bureaucratic and extremely inefficient. OAG considers that MEHRD and the Education Authorities should vigorously pursue the streamlining of administrative processes in the education system. Increased emphasis should also be placed on appropriate resourcing and improved processing of personnel matters and for the timely resolution of teacher concerns about their salary and conditions of service.

Recommendation No. 2

2.6.18 OAG recommends that MEHRD and the Education Authorities should place greatly increased emphasis on appropriate resourcing and streamlining of administrative processes for resolving teacher conditions of service matters.

Quantification of the level of teacher absenteeism

2.6.19 OAG sought to quantify the level of teacher absenteeism in Solomon Island's primary schools as part of this audit. Neither MEHRD nor any of the Education Authorities visited were found to have available any useful teacher attendance data on which to base absenteeism estimates. This was due both to the poor quality of data available and resourcing constraints on collection and analysis of the data.

2.6.20 However, the interviews undertaken by OAG across the Solomon Island's education system resulted in strong qualitative evidence that teacher absenteeism was a significant issue in primary schools – this was a consistent theme reflected across the range of organisations reviewed and in all the provinces visited. Estimates provided to the team on the average number of teachers away without authorisation at any point in time, ranged from 10% to 25%. Very few schools had all teachers present on the day of the audit team's visit and Head Teachers often admitted to teachers being away without authorisation in the previous fortnight. The team also visited a number of primary schools on

two different paydays and found in a number of cases that schools had effectively closed down for the day, while teachers travelled to a capital city to collect their pay.

2.6.21 A 2009 MEHRD review of two Community High Schools (which contain Primary Schools) concluded that an average of 14% and 21% of teachers respectively, failed to report their presence (refer section 3.2 of this report). Although the actual level of absenteeism was likely to be less than this, due to teachers simply forgetting to sign on, absenteeism was nevertheless considered significant.

2.6.22 If we take a conservative approach and assume an average unauthorised absenteeism level of 10% of primary school teachers, the total opportunity cost of lost teacher wages due to unauthorised absence is \$12.2m pa. However, the true cost of teacher absenteeism is the adverse learning impact on students and the true opportunity cost to the nation is the delivery of sub-standard education services to school students.

2.6.23 OAG considers that MEHRD should collect accurate absenteeism data across all provinces in order to fully understand the extent of the teacher absenteeism problem and to highlight areas most requiring corrective action.

Recommendation No. 3

2.6.24 OAG recommends that MEHRD should collect accurate absenteeism data across all provinces in order to fully understand the extent of the teacher absenteeism problem and to highlight areas most requiring corrective action.

Monitoring, reporting and enforcing teacher attendance

2.6.25 OAG fieldwork highlighted significant inefficiencies in the way the education system records and reports teacher attendance and associated instances of absenteeism. This was found to be the case at all levels in the education system, from the records held at individual primary schools through to those at Education Authorities and at MEHRD.

2.6.26 All primary schools visited by OAG used a daily teacher attendance register. These registers recorded the start and end times for each teacher for each day of the term. Teachers are required to put their start and finish times and to sign off against these times.

2.6.27 OAG noted that some schools required their teachers to record only the instructional hours i.e. from 8.30am to 1.30pm. Other schools required teachers to sign off when they left school, after completing the extracurricular activities (i.e. 1.30pm to 4.30pm). These extracurricular duties include sports, school maintenance and lesson plan preparations for the following day.

2.6.28 OAG considers that all primary schools should record the actual time teachers spend at school, that is both class time and

extracurricular time. The current teaching service handbook policy does not specifically outline this requirement. MEHRD should enforce this policy and amend section 11.4.1 of the teaching service handbook to clarify and reflect this.

2.6.29 OAG also observed, at most schools visited, that the registers were not always completed, often with blank entries against some teachers names or against whole days. It is essential that accurate records be kept by schools if the Ministry is to fully appreciate the true extent of teacher absenteeism.

2.6.30 OAG considers that the Ministry should enforce a policy whereby all schools maintain an accurate and complete register of attendance by all teachers, recording the actual time teachers spend working at school.

Recommendation No. 4

2.6.31 OAG recommends that MEHRD should enforce a policy whereby all schools maintain an accurate and complete register of daily attendance by all teachers and that the actual time teachers spend working at school each day be recorded.

2.6.32 Head Teachers are required to review the daily attendance registers for unapproved teacher absences and complete an Absence Report Form for each teacher with an unauthorised absence (TSH, sections 11.4.1, 11.4.2 and Appendix E). The Absence Report Forms are required to be sent to the relevant Education Authority fortnightly. However, some Head Teachers are hesitant to report absent teachers if they are part of their Wantok or are their friends. This is reinforced by the fact that many Education Authorities fail to take action on unauthorised absences.

2.6.33 Under section 11.4.3 of the TSH, Education Authorities are required to act on the Absence Report, including withholding salary for the absent days, and to forward their decision to the TSO (in MEHRD). The TSO should then implement the decision of the Authority and may, if it thinks fit, refer the decision to the TSC for further action. Under sections 11.4.4 and 11.4.5 of the TSH, a teacher who is absent from duty without authorisation for a period in excess of 15 working days is liable for dismissal.

2.6.34 The reporting system for absenteeism has many stages to it and is consequently overly bureaucratic and extremely slow. Many Head Teachers complained that no action is taken by Education Authorities when they do send in the reports and others considered that the long time taken for a report to reach MEHRD and for salary action to be taken against teachers with unapproved absences, makes it barely worthwhile to take the trouble to report.

2.6.35 OAG was informed that even when teacher absences were recorded and reported to Education Authorities by Head Teachers, reports were seldom made by the Authorities to the Ministry to instigate salary deductions. Education Authorities

confirmed this to be the case and informed OAG that in severe cases their normal action is to send a warning letter to a teacher. However this is largely ineffective as teachers who are threatened with salary deductions or termination know that they simply have to return to school for a short period and then can take further unauthorised leave, as stronger action than a warning letter is seldom taken.

2.6.36 OAG considers that the Ministry should enforce a policy whereby all schools must report fortnightly to the relevant Education Authority on unauthorised teacher absences. MEHRD should also require Education Authorities to act on all absence reports received and forward their decisions to the TSO. The TSO should then take action with MoFT to withhold teacher salaries for unauthorised periods of absence. Without a strengthening of the reporting requirements and an enforcement of the policy to withhold teacher salaries for unauthorised absences, teacher absenteeism will remain at high levels and continue to be a significant constraint on the provision of education services in the Solomon Islands.

Recommendation No. 5

2.6.37 OAG recommends that MEHRD should:

- a) enforce a policy whereby all schools are required to report fortnightly to the relevant Education Authority on unauthorised teacher absences;
- b) ensure that Education Authorities act on the absence reports and forward their decisions to MEHRD; and
- c) act on the absence reports by withholding teacher salaries for unauthorised periods of absence from school.

School inspection activities

2.6.38 The Inspectorate and Advisory Services Division (IASD) in the Ministry has a key role to play in the advancement and promotion of teachers. New teacher graduates serve a one year probationary period and can only have their appointment confirmed after the conduct of a successful 'probationary inspection'. If the ministry inspection does not occur during the first year of teaching then the relevant Education Authority should assess the teacher within the following six months (TSH, section 8.2.1). OAG was informed of many probationers that had not had their probationary inspection undertaken by either the Ministry or the relevant Education Authority, some after several years of employment. In Makira, one Head Teacher noted that probationary inspections had not been undertaken at his school for 10 years.

2.6.39 Inspections are also required to be undertaken for responsibility post holders during the first year in which the teacher serves on the trial promotion. Equally, a 'fixed term

inspection' is required to be conducted on teachers whose term of contract is drawing near to the end and requires renewal (TSH, sections 8.2.2 and 8.2.3). Where a teacher's performance is unsatisfactory (including in relation to unapproved absences), a 'compulsory inspection' or an 'immediate inspection' may be undertaken. If as a result of these inspections a teacher is found not to be suitable for the appointment, the Education Authority may terminate the appointment and inform the TSO and the TSC.

2.6.40 An issue that was raised with the OAG team during fieldwork in the provinces was that many teachers were awaiting these compulsory inspections in order to have promotions confirmed. In discussions with the MEHRD IASD, it was noted that there were a number of establishment positions in the division that were not filled and three provinces did not have a primary school inspector, at the time of fieldwork. A number of Head Teachers commented to OAG that their primary school seldom received inspection visits, some noted that the inspectors undertake only brief contact visits at the beginning of the academic year, while others complained that they had not received any visits in the current academic year.

2.6.41 OAG considers that, given the importance of the inspectorate function, the IASD should be fully resourced and that it should endeavour to complete a full cycle of annual school inspections.

Recommendation No. 6

2.6.42 OAG recommends that MEHRD should fully resource its Inspectorate and Advisory Services Division and that it should endeavour to complete a full cycle of school inspections each year.

Need to further develop education policy

2.6.43 The Teaching Service Handbook is a comprehensive policy document that outlines the major responsibilities of teachers and the educational institutions. However, OAG identified some areas where the TSH requires clarification.

2.6.44 As noted above, OAG considers that all primary schools should record the actual time teachers spend at school (that is, both class time and extracurricular time). As the current TSH does not specifically outline this requirement, MEHRD should amend section 11.4.1 of the TSH to reflect this.

2.6.45 Although section 13.1.2 of the TSH identifies the payment of teacher's annual leave travel expenses as the responsibility of the Education Authorities, this responsibility is now shared 50/50 with the Ministry under a 2007 MOU. MEHRD needs to revise the policy to reflect any changed responsibilities and amend the TSH accordingly.

2.6.46 Furthermore OAG noted an important point raised in a special audit on Honiara City Council Education program in 2007 in regards budget prepared by Education Office

“There has been an inadequate level of accountability over the budgeting and payments of teachers travel allowances which leaves the arrangements open to possible abuse such as by way of misappropriation of funds by both the teachers and Education Divisions officers”

2.6.46 The payment of housing and other allowances by Education Authorities varies greatly from province to province. MEHRD should undertake steps to provide a more equitable distribution by Education Authorities of teacher allowances and clarify responsibilities for the provision of the various allowances to teachers.

2.6.47 Section 14.7.1 of the TSH provides for up to 10 days compassionate leave (per event) in the case of a serious illness or death of a member of a teachers immediate family. This provision is interpreted inconsistently by different schools and by different Education Authorities. A number of schools were noted to allow 14 or more days compassionate leave with full pay while some have negotiated a community agreement to allow only one day of leave for a funeral. The interpretation of an immediate family member is also not strictly adhered to. Many instances were advised to OAG where leave was granted to teachers for the death of more distant relatives or even to unrelated members of the local community. OAG concluded that the liberal interpretation of this policy was a significant source of teacher absenteeism. MEHRD should tighten the requirements of this policy and reinforce it with all Education Authorities and Head Teachers.

2.6.48 Not all teachers were noted to have a copy of the current Teaching Service Handbook, 2007. Indeed, OAG visited some primary schools where they did not have an up-to-date copy of the TSH. OAG considers that MEHRD should ensure that all primary schools have access to an up-to-date version of the TSH and that new teachers are provided with a copy.

Recommendation No. 7

2.6.49 OAG recommends that MEHRD should undertake the following policy review actions:

- a) amend section 11.4.1 of the Teaching Service Handbook to require all primary schools to record the actual time teachers spend at school;
- b) revise the policy on the payment of teacher's annual leave travel expenses to reflect any changed responsibilities and

- amend section 13.1.2 of the Teaching Service Handbook accordingly;
- c) OAG recommends that arrangements for payment of Teachers Travel Allowances be appropriately identified well in advance each year to ensure that teachers are paid only their entitlement in a timely manner and that appropriate controls be enforced including:
 - Establishing an appropriate disbursement method which ensures that the intended recipients receive their entitlement
 - Making alternative arrangements for distributing the moneys other than through individual officers personal accounts
 - Verifying entitlements and formulating the annual budget well before Christmas vacation period commences
 - d) undertake steps to provide a more equitable receipt by teachers of allowances paid by different Education Authorities and clarify responsibilities for the provision of the various allowances to teachers in the Teaching Service Handbook;
 - e) tighten the requirements of the compassionate leave policy and reinforce its requirements with all Education Authorities and Head Teachers, particularly in respect of the period of leave and the interpretation of an immediate family member; and
 - f) ensure that all primary schools and new teachers have access to an up-to-date copy of the Teaching Service Handbook.

3. Causal factors behind teacher absenteeism

3.1 Background

3.1.1 This chapter summarises OAGs conclusions in regard to the primary environmental factors contributing to teacher absenteeism, beyond the organisational and governance factors outlined in chapter 2.

Audit criteria

3.1.2 OAG considers that MEHRD and the Education Authorities should be identifying common factors which cause excessive teacher absenteeism and introducing measures to counter these factors.

3.2 Teacher Effectiveness Study

3.2.1 In 2009, an MEHRD taskforce conducted a review known as the teacher effectiveness study, which resulted in the production of the 'Teacher Attendance Project Report'. The purpose of the project was to study the issue of teacher attendance at two typical schools in Honiara. The schools chosen were Community High Schools, which contain both primary and secondary classes. One was a public school and one a private school.

3.2.2 The major findings of the study were:

- poor teacher attendance was considered to be one of the major constraints to improving education services;
- records from an eight week period indicated that an average of 14% and 21% of teachers failed to report their presence at the two schools reviewed. Actual absenteeism, while less than this, was nevertheless considered significant;
- even though teacher absences were noted to have been reported to Education Authorities by the school Principals, no reports were then made to the Ministry to instigate deductions in pay;
- schools had the core elements for recording teacher attendance but these records were not being used and that policy and processes for managing teacher attendance were inadequate;
- the report noted the limited capacity of the Education Authorities to manage absenteeism as being a major constraint in dealing with the issue;
- the Teaching Service Handbook, while providing a framework for monitoring teacher attendance, did not appear to be followed; and

- the study also noted a policy issue of school Principals being unwilling to report teacher absenteeism to higher authorities.

3.3 Barriers to Education Review

3.3.1 In 2010, a research study was conducted on behalf of MEHRD on barriers to education in the Solomon Islands. The Barriers to Education in the Solomon Islands study focused on five areas of the Solomon Islands: Rennell, Isabel, Temotu, North Malaita and the greater Honiara area. The conduct of teachers emerged as a significant issue in Temotu. Concerns about teachers included teacher absenteeism and lateness, and the Premier of Temotu told the study team that: 'MEHRD must take action on teachers as their behaviour is affecting students' learning.' The issue of teacher lateness was considered to be partly caused by distance from home and school, but parents and children reported that teachers may be in school, yet do not necessarily attend class. In Honiara the study noted that 'the urban and peri-urban nature of Honiara means that the population does not live in socially cohesive villages as in rural areas, ... [however] many issues were similar to rural areas, such as high levels of teacher and student absenteeism.'

3.3.2 The study noted that 'Teachers are the key facilitators of education and should be enablers, not barriers. Teacher competence and commitment are of crucial importance in improving student achievement levels and in encouraging regular school attendance. It is a cause of serious concern that teachers are widely seen as hindrances in the education process ... teachers are directly under the control of the MEHRD and it is within its powers to resolve these critical issues.'

3.3.3 The study took note of past reviews in order to provide background information and verification for its survey of different stakeholders in Solomon Islands education. It referred to Catherwood's 2009 Evaluation Report on Solomon Islands National Education Action Plan 2007-2009, noting that it had highlighted the lack of a system to effectively manage teacher absenteeism as well as the need for awareness programmes for parents and the community.

3.3.4 The Barriers to Education study concluded that there is a weak system of reporting teacher absenteeism and that Education Authorities 'do not appear to have powers to act beyond writing stern circulars warning of the consequences of misdemeanours.' The study highlighted that teacher absenteeism encourages student absenteeism, that teacher absenteeism was a recurring theme in every part of the country and that it appeared to have reached crisis point.

3.3.5 The study noted that there were a range of reasons for teacher absenteeism. A common reason for teacher absenteeism is the collection by teachers of their salary each fortnight. Some

schools have addressed this by using a roster so that selected teachers only need to go to the main town to shop on behalf of others. This system has apparently not always succeeded with occurrences of teachers staying away from school for several days after pay day. It was also stated that it is commonplace for teachers to take extra days off when going away for the weekend and that some teachers may be away for weeks when going to Honiara to visit MEHRD or to conduct personal business. A system for weekly banking was successfully tried in rural areas of Malaita. It had to be terminated due to security reasons.

3.3.6 The study noted other reasons for teachers being absent from school that included:

- the conduct of private business during school hours;
- other priorities such as family, church and community involvement; and
- poor rural infrastructure – the poor condition of roads and bridges may mean that teachers do not attend in the event of bad weather. This may particularly be the case if they live a long distance away from their school.

3.3.7 Poor conditions of service may also be a factor which undermines teacher commitment and fosters absenteeism. The study noted that many teachers consider that they have poor working conditions and low pay. The lack of teacher housing is also of concern to teachers and it was considered that additional housing may go some way to alleviating absenteeism.

3.4 The education environment and teacher absenteeism

3.4.1 OAG fieldwork included the consideration of a range of documentation and the conduct of a series of interviews with officers at Solomon Islands education institutions and primary schools. In addition to the organisational and governance issues identified in Chapter 2, this fieldwork highlighted additional environmental factors which need to be considered when seeking to resolve the issues surrounding teacher absenteeism. These factors include:

- conditions of service issues;
- teacher training and attitudes to work;
- the need for strong leadership;
- late return of teachers at the beginning of the academic year;
- community support to primary schools; and
- coordination between education review teams.

Conditions of service issues

3.4.2 In discussions with OAG, teachers identified a number of areas of dissatisfaction relating to their conditions of service.

These issues included:

- frequent complaints as to the poor level of pay for teachers (MEHRD noted that a Unified Salary Structure was introduced in 2006 to equalise salary levels between the Teaching Service and the Public Service);
- inequitable provision of allowances by different Education Authorities e.g. the provision of an accommodation allowance to teachers varies between Education Authorities;
- extremely slow administrative processing of conditions of service matters, in particular salary amendments and increments, promotions, fixed term contract renewals and probationary advancement – in regard to the latter three, the prerequisite performance inspection is not always carried out as required in TSH sections 8.1.2, 8.2.1 and 8.2.3; and
- unlike public servants, no special duty allowance is paid for work undertaken out-of-hours, such as preparation in the evenings for the following days classes.

Collectively these matters weigh heavily on teachers, affecting their attitudes to work and their commitment to attending school.

3.4.3 The Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) identified several conditions of service issues of particular concern to it:

- inadequate staff housing and inadequate housing allowances where no houses are provided;
- insufficient amounts being paid for teacher's annual leave travel expenses;
- low salaries; and
- inadequate travelling allowances where no transport is provided.

SINTA noted that neglecting these key conditions of service leads to low morale in teachers and to problems such as absenteeism.

3.4.4 OAG considers that MEHRD should identify the key areas of teacher dissatisfaction with their conditions of service and undertake specific measures to address these concerns. In particular, MEHRD should improve the efficiency of its administrative processing of conditions of service matters and the issue of teacher housing could be addressed by the construction of additional teacher housing at those schools most in need. Other areas such as the inequitable provision of allowances by Education Authorities should also be given priority, as it is a major cause of disaffection amongst teachers.

Teacher training and attitudes to work

3.4.5 Interviews conducted by OAG also resulted in a number of comments relating to the inappropriate attitude of many teachers in regard to their prioritising private activities over the responsibility to attend school. Examples often cited were that

teachers attended to personal matters or to the conduct of private business during school hours (this latter point was explained as the need to supplement low teacher salaries). Community and church activities were also cited as being given priority by teachers over attendance at school. It was also commonplace for teachers to be absent from school to attend to family matters. Such matters included attending to sick children or relatives, the settling of family disputes and meeting with visiting relatives. These attitudes inevitably lead to teachers taking unauthorised days off or coming late to school.

3.4.6 SINTA raised the issue of teacher training and whether or not teachers were fully prepared for their professional responsibilities by their current qualifications – this was particularly in regard to areas such as ethical and professional standards. OAG was also advised that not all teachers have a professional qualification e.g. Teachers in Training is a category of teachers without formal qualifications, but which may be paid by their local village to provide teaching support in the village school.

3.4.7 The Solomon Islands College of Higher Education noted that their professional studies course clearly outlined requirements for ethical behaviour by teachers. They proposed several mechanisms to address the problem of teacher absenteeism:

- the use of employment contracts to stipulate expected behaviours;
- teacher workshops to reinforce ethical codes and professional behaviours;
- monitoring of teacher performance and mentoring of new teachers;
- the need for MEHRD and Education Authorities to reinforce professional ethics with teachers; and
- enforcement of required contractual performance.

3.4.8 MEHRD should endeavour to foster a professional culture in teachers and ensure that those teachers without a professional qualification are provided with supplementary training which covers their ethical responsibilities. Professional teaching qualifications, such as those delivered by the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, should strengthen their emphasis on the need for teachers to conduct themselves in a professional and ethical manner, in order to prepare teachers fully for their roles.

Recommendation No. 8

3.4.9 OAG recommends that MEHRD should foster a professional culture in teachers and ensure that those teachers

without a professional qualification are provided with supplementary training which covers their ethical responsibilities.

Need for strong leadership

3.4.10 In discussions at primary schools, OAG noted that strong leadership by Head Teachers can dramatically reduce teacher absenteeism. At one school in Makira, the Head Teacher instituted a firm teacher attendance policy, requiring all absences to be approved in advance. This was communicated to teachers during their induction program at the beginning of the school year. The policy was enforced through the monitoring of teacher attendance by the Head Teacher and resulted in a dramatic reduction in unapproved attendances.

3.4.11 The granting of compassionate leave for family illness or bereavement is an area that differs greatly between regions and Education Authorities. The Teaching Service Handbook, section 14.7.1 refers to the granting of leave up to 10 days per event for an immediate family member, however different Head Teachers and Education Authorities apply a range of informal modifications to this policy. OAG was advised of past practice where it was not uncommon for teachers to take leave for several weeks at a time for the bereavement of a member of the local community, with the result that many classes would be cancelled for long periods, with student education consequently suffering.

3.4.12 However OAG also interviewed Head Teachers that have instituted firm policies to try and minimise the impact of this past practice on their students. One Head Teacher in Malaita had a policy limiting compassionate leave to a total of 14 days in a year. At another school in Malaita the Head Teacher outlined a policy whereby teachers were only allowed the day off for the funeral of a close relative. This policy was agreed by the Parent Teachers Association at its first meeting in the school year and was communicated to and accepted by all the teachers. Where Head Teachers have instituted and enforced firm policies relating to approved leave, there has been a significant reduction in unapproved absences.

3.4.13 Absences by teachers for reasons of family obligations is also a significant reason for unapproved absences. In one school in Honiara, a Head Teacher described an instance where a teacher wished to take the day off as she felt an obligation to greet a visiting relative when he arrived at the wharf. The Head Teacher sat down with the teacher and they discussed the teacher's responsibilities to her students and the impact of the decision on student education. The Head Teacher's proactive approach resulted in a reduction of the teacher's absence from one day to several hours. She also instituted a process of monitoring absent teachers by using class captains to record the presence of teachers in class. She noted that this resulted in a dramatic reduction of teachers taking time off during the day.

3.4.14 At other schools Head Teachers noted that they regularly checked classes during the day, for teachers presence. Proactive Head Teachers invariably monitor and record teacher attendance in a conscientious manner. The above examples are instances where strong leadership by Head Teachers has dramatically reduced teacher absenteeism at their primary schools, and this should be fostered by Education Authorities and the Ministry.

Late return of teachers at the beginning of the academic year

3.4.15 OAG fieldwork involved reviewing teacher attendance records and an issue that became apparent, at all schools visited, was the late return of teachers back to school at the beginning of the academic year. Many schools did not commence classes until several weeks into the 2011 academic year - one school in Central Province did not start until week eight of the ten week first term, largely due to the unavailability of teachers returning late from their annual leave.

3.4.16 At the end of each school year, most teachers return to their home village for the Christmas holidays. It has been past practice for the authorities to pay for the travel expenses of teachers to return home each year. This is consistent with most government and private organizations in the Solomon Islands.

3.4.17 Under High Court judgement HC-CC 225 of 2000, Education Authorities are responsible for the provision of allowances for teaching staff, including the 'leave passage' travel expenses. However, budgetary constraints within the Education Authorities have meant that they have not been able to pay for the full costs. Under a 2007 MOU, MEHRD and the Education Authorities are each responsible for paying half the cost of these expenses. In order to keep these costs down, several authorities now organise charter boats for their teachers between the main islands, however many teachers complained that they were not paid sufficiently by the Education Authorities to cover the cost of returning to school or that they could not get bookings until after the commencement of the school year. These were considered to be the primary causes of teachers returning late to their schools at the beginning of the year.

3.4.18 OAG considers that MEHRD should enforce a policy whereby all teachers must return to their schools in time to commence classes at the beginning of week one in each academic year. The Ministry should also coordinate with Education Authorities to ensure that adequate funding is provided to pay teachers for their 'leave passage' travel expenses, so that they are able to return on time.

Recommendation No. 9

3.4.19 OAG recommends that MEHRD should enforce a policy whereby all teachers must return to their schools in time to

commence classes at the beginning of week one in each academic year.

Community support to primary schools

3.4.20 The Head Teachers of most schools visited by OAG noted an active support of their school by the local community. The primary mechanism through which this community support was delivered was via the School Board.

3.4.21 In contrast to this, one school in Central Province highlighted that a poor attitude by the local community was having a dramatic impact on the ability of the school to operate, and in particular was resulting in high levels of teacher absenteeism. For example, the community was disputing the boundaries of the school land and thus holding up the possible construction of additional teacher housing. Internal divisions and disputes within the community also resulted in a decision by many not to support school activities. Some members of the community also wished to have a strong say in the allocation of the school budget and disputed the budgetary support for the extension school. Also mentioned were instances where teachers were threatened by individuals in the community and where police took no action. The negative community attitude has had a significant impact on the teachers willingness to attend class.

3.4.22 It is essential that Education Authorities and the Ministry provide additional support to Head Teachers in situations where they are not supported by the local community. For this to occur, there must be regular contact with schools by Education Authority personnel and such instances then need to be reported to the Ministry for further supportive action.

Coordination between education review teams

3.4.23 A number of reviews into the Solomon Islands education system have been undertaken in recent years. These reviews include the Barriers to Education review, the Teacher Effectiveness Study, the Waikato University mentoring program and activities conducted under the NZ VSA program.

3.4.24 During fieldwork in the provinces the OAG team came across two different teams conducting education reviews, of which it was unaware. OAG concluded that some of these reviews have been undertaken in relative isolation, with little coordination between them, nor sharing of their findings.

3.4.25 OAG considers that MEHRD should ensure that all reviews into the education sector are well coordinated and that each review team is aware of other relevant studies.

4. Factors external to the education system

4.1 Background

4.1.1 This chapter outlines factors external to the education system that foster teacher absenteeism. It considers strategies that MEHRD could pursue, in consultation with other relevant SIG agencies, to develop and implement initiatives to counter these external factors.

Audit criteria

4.1.2 OAG considers that MEHRD should, in coordination with other relevant SIG agencies, introduce initiatives to counter factors external to the education system, that foster teacher absenteeism.

4.2 Teacher access to the banking system

4.2.1 OAG fieldwork discussions noted that teachers are often absent from school on paydays. The audit team observed, during visits to several schools on a payday, that many teachers were absent. The reasons given were that they were away collecting their pay from the nearest bank or bank agency. It was explained that teachers can often be absent for several days. The reasons for the extended absence on paydays are several:

- Teachers often have to walk long distances (up to twenty or more kilometres) or take long boat rides to get to the nearest bank - OAG noted one instance where a teacher left his school at 4 am on a payday, walked five hours to Kirakira to pick up his pay and then walked the five hours back in the evening. For one primary school in the south of Makira it is a six hour open boat ride to Kirakira and thus takes two days to pick up a teacher's pay. From the Ulawa and Santa Ana islands, it takes one day by boat in each direction to go to Kirakira, but with rough seas this may be delayed by several days.
- Instances were noted in other provinces where teachers travelled for many hours in open boats to reach their nearest bank - in one case a teacher spent \$200 to take a boat to the bank agent in Tulaghi to find that the bank agent had limited funds and could only give him \$200 of his salary. Having gone to great lengths to get to the bank, teachers may well find that the banking system is not working or that their pay has not been processed correctly.
- Having travelled long distances to collect their pay teachers often conduct other business in town and so may be away several days - in one instance, OAG was advised that a Head Teacher in Central Province had been absent from school for a month conducting private business in Honiara.

- Adverse weather conditions may also extend a teachers absence from school – for example rough seas may delay a teacher’s return by boat. Poor infrastructure such as muddy roads and the absence of bridges over many rivers, may impact on teachers return to school.

4.2.2 OAG noted that there is a poor banking infrastructure in the provinces. In Makira, Central, Temotu and Isabel provinces there are no bank branches and only one bank agency in each province. Renbel Province does not have a bank agent. The poor banking infrastructure exacerbates the length of time that teachers are away on paydays.

4.2.3 Some Head Teachers have implemented arrangements within their schools to minimize the impact of paydays on teacher attendance. This includes nominating a single teacher to collect pays on behalf of their fellow teachers. Although this minimises the impact of absent teachers on school activities, it has some additional risk for teachers in regard to the possibility of their pay being stolen or lost. Other schools have instituted a roster system whereby half the teachers collect their pay on the Thursday payday while the other half of the teachers collect their pay on the Friday. This ensures that all classes are still held on both days, however, learning will still be disrupted as there will then only be one teacher for every two classes on both days.

4.2.4 OAG considers that teacher absenteeism would be greatly reduced on paydays if the provincial banking infrastructure was improved. MEHRD should initiate discussions with the banking sector to expand its banking service in the provinces. The Ministry may also wish to consider the cost effectiveness of sending out pay teams to some of the more remote sites, to reduce teacher’s need to travel long distances to collect their pay. OAG conservatively estimates that the opportunity cost of lost teacher wages due to absence while collecting their pay, exceeds \$6m pa. Even if the Ministry was able to reduce payday absenteeism by half, the savings of \$3m in lost teaching time would more than offset the cost of sending out pay teams to remote schools in the provinces.

Recommendation No. 10

4.2.5 OAG recommends that MEHRD should initiate discussions with the banking sector to expand its banking service in the provinces and should actively pursue the feasibility of sending out pay teams to some of the more remote areas, to reduce the need for teachers to travel long distances to collect their pay.

4.3 Shortage of teacher accommodation

4.3.1 When teachers are posted to new schools (every three years), their accommodation may be a significant distance from their new school. With poor transportation infrastructure this often results in teachers travelling for an hour or more to get to and from school. At a school in Makira one teacher was noted to walk seven kilometres each morning from his home to school. Other examples were cited where teachers may have to walk for several hours to school or to paddle a canoe to school from a nearby island. This often results in teachers coming late to school, particularly in bad weather.

4.3.2 Many schools have constructed teacher housing on school grounds to help minimize this problem. This is often achieved with the help of the local community or with funding from aid donors such as NZAid and AusAid. However, there still remains a shortage of teacher accommodation at or nearby most primary schools.

4.3.3 OAG fieldwork showed that schools with a high percentage of teachers living on-site in school housing generally had lower levels of teacher absenteeism, particularly with their start and finish times. OAG considers that MEHRD should place increased emphasis on providing supplementary funding for school housing at those schools most in need and for coordinating the construction of school housing with local communities.

Recommendation No. 11

4.3.4 OAG recommends that MEHRD should provide supplementary funding for the construction of additional teacher housing at those schools most in need and help coordinate the construction of teacher housing with local communities.

4.4 Transport and communications infrastructure

4.4.1 The poor condition of roads and the absence of bridges over many rivers may mean that teachers are either delayed or do not attend school in the event of bad weather. This is particularly the case if they live a long distance away from their school.

4.4.2 OAG was also informed that there are often significant delays in the processing of administrative matters between the Education Authorities and schools. Many areas of the provinces have poor communications with no phone, email or postal services available. Poor communications between schools and Education Authorities may mean that teachers have to travel to see their Education Authority or the Ministry to deliver documentation or to resolve issues. This directly contributes to teacher absenteeism.

4.4.3 Improved communications with the more remote schools may alleviate part of this problem. OAG was informed by one Education Authority that it uses a radio system over which weekly school reports are received and teacher concerns are discussed. OAG is of the opinion that all Education Authorities should invest in adequate systems to communicate with their schools.

4.4.4 OAG also considers that more needs to be done to coordinate with the Ministry of Infrastructure Development to improve the transport and communications infrastructure requirements for schools.

Recommendation No. 12

4.4.5 OAG recommends that MEHRD should initiate a dialogue with the Ministry of Infrastructure Development to improve the transport and communications infrastructure requirements of schools.

Abbreviations

FI	Financial Instructions 2004 and 2010
GO	General Orders
IASD	Inspectorate and Advisory Services Division
MEHRD	Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development
MID	Ministry of Infrastructure Development
MoFT	Ministry of Finance and Treasury
OAG	Office of the Auditor-General
PS	Permanent Secretary
SIG	Solomon Islands Government
SINTA	Solomon Islands Teachers Association
TSC	Teaching Service Commission
TSD	Teaching Service Division
TSH	Teaching Service Handbook
TSO	Teaching Service Office

