

# Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) Trial (2009 - 2012)

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## FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

FORMER DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

MAY 2014

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ASGC	Australian Standard Geographical Classification
COAG	The Council of Australian Governments
DEEWR	former Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DHS	Australian Government Department of Human Services
DSP	Disability Support Pension
ECC	Every Child Counts
ECED	Every Child Every Day
ELO	Education Liaison Officer
FaHCSIA	former Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
IAP	Individual Attendance Plan
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
NSA	NewStart Allowance
NT	Northern Territory
NT CEO	Northern Territory Catholic Education Office
NT DET	former Northern Territory Department of Education and Training
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
PPP	Parenting Payment Partnered
PPS	Parenting Payment Single
QLD	Queensland
QLD DETE	Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment
RED	Research and Evaluation Dataset
SEAM	Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure
SWIS	Social Work Information System

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) trial commenced in six Northern Territory (NT) trial sites<sup>1</sup> situated in remote and very remote areas from January 2009. SEAM participating schools in NT sites included 14 schools – nine government schools administered by the former Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (NT DET), four Catholic schools under the administration of the Northern Territory Catholic Education Office (NT CEO) and one non-government school operated under the Tiwi Education Board. An additional six trial sites commenced in selected Queensland (QLD) suburban Logan and remote locations<sup>2</sup> during October 2009. SEAM participating schools in QLD sites included 30 government schools administered by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (QLD DETE). The trial ended on 30 June 2012.

The SEAM measure was designed to trial the attachment of conditions to income support payments with the aim of encouraging parents (or those with responsibility for a child) to ensure that their child of compulsory school age was enrolled in and attended school regularly. SEAM was one of many policy measures initiated by the Australian Government and state and territory governments which invested in targeted approaches to improve school enrolment and attendance. Importantly, findings show that SEAM had appropriately targeted the problem of unauthorised absences as SEAM students tended to have higher rates of unauthorised absences in both the NT and QLD compared to their non-SEAM counterparts in the same schools. Under SEAM, there were two distinct components – the enrolment component and the attendance component. Acting as an additional tool, SEAM was used to complement existing strategies to address non-enrolment and poor attendance, in particular unauthorised absenteeism.

Under the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999*<sup>3</sup> parents/caregivers in scope for SEAM were subject to schooling requirements as a condition of their receipt of income support payments. The threat of possible suspension of income support payments was intended to be an effective motivator to encourage school enrolment and attendance. The suspension of income support payments under SEAM was only used as a last resort. As an integrated part of this measure, social work contact was offered by the Australian Government Department of Human Services (DHS) to support families who faced complex and multiple barriers to comply with the SEAM requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> Six trial sites in the NT were: Katherine Township, Katherine Town Camps, Hermannsburg, Wallace Rockhole, the Tiwi Islands and Wadeye.

<sup>2</sup> Six trial sites in QLD were: Logan Central, Kingston, Woodridge, Eagleby, Doomadgee and Mornington Island.

<sup>3</sup> [The Social Security \(Administration\) Act 1999](#) can be found on the comlaw website.

The aim of the final evaluation of the SEAM trial was to provide evidence on whether the trial achieved its desired outcomes. Lessons learnt from the evaluation of the trial are expected to improve SEAM and to inform further policy development. A mixed method approach was adopted to evaluate the implementation and impact of the SEAM trial by analysing a range of quantitative and qualitative information.

In the final evaluation of the SEAM trial, the 'Theory of Change'<sup>4</sup> approach was utilised to guide the evaluation focus and to explicitly identify key elements to consider when evaluating the trial, including reasons for change, resources for successful implementation of the trial and pathways that may have influenced behavioural change under SEAM. In considering potential key elements of influencing change, a detailed literature review was conducted which found that:

- Factors associated with non-enrolment and unauthorised absenteeism of compulsory school age children are multi-dimensional.
- Parental efforts, among all other factors, are prominent in encouraging and supporting education.
- When conditions are attached to welfare entitlements, the threat effect is what evokes behavioural change rather than the actual sanction itself.
- The provision of support services is crucial for the success of an intervention under a deterrent strategy such as SEAM.

Guided by the Theory of Change approach for the SEAM trial and findings from the literature review, the final evaluation has focused on the following key areas:

- The effectiveness of communication and implementation strategies.
- The effectiveness of the enrolment component.
- The effectiveness of the attendance component, including impact analysis on the SEAM effect, the threat effect of possible suspension of income support payments, the role of support services via social work contact.
- Behavioural change in relation to school enrolment and attendance as a result of SEAM.

Evaluation findings on these key areas are outlined below.

### **Communication and SEAM implementation**

Raising awareness and communicating the SEAM trial message was the first step towards influencing behaviour change. Communication strategies were put in place when the SEAM trial was introduced in the NT and QLD, but differing jurisdictional strategies resulted in a different level of awareness and understanding about SEAM.

#### ***Awareness and understanding of SEAM among key stakeholders***

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of theory-guided program evaluation was first introduced by Carol Weiss in 1972 (Weiss 1972). The Theory of Change approach has since been developed and adopted in evaluation practice. In short, it is a framework to describe how and why an initiative works in theory.



The first mail out by NT DET to all in-scope parents requesting enrolment details of their school-age child was an effective way of raising awareness across a wider group of parents in the NT sites. By comparison, QLD only requested enrolment information from SEAM parents whose child's enrolment details were not found through linking enrolment data with SEAM customer data. This approach made use of available enrolment information to improve the process of requesting enrolment details but resulted in a limited number of parents being made aware of the trial when SEAM was first introduced.

In addition, schools also played an important role in disseminating SEAM messages to parents. Participating schools in QLD, in particular, in Logan, appeared well informed with training sessions held and well-prepared information materials made available on the SEAM trial through the joint effort of the Australian and Queensland governments. These schools were found to be adequately equipped to use a range of SEAM information materials to raise awareness of SEAM among parents in QLD.

As previously reported in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, the importance of effective communication about SEAM implementation was confirmed through feedback from fieldwork undertaken for the evaluation. The feedback showed that, of those parents in Logan who had heard about SEAM prior to implementation, almost half reported that the implementation had made them think about the importance of their child's schooling, and some also noted the trial had encouraged them to make more efforts to address their school-age child's attendance issues.

In NT sites, awareness of SEAM, in particular the role played by SEAM schools, varied among school principals. A joint communication strategy was implemented at the beginning of the trial in the NT to raise awareness of SEAM. But the time taken to finalise the SEAM model prior to implementation led to minimal time available to communicate consistent information on SEAM to schools. School principals reported that they had not been provided with information about SEAM process, particularly SEAM requirements, in a timely manner. As a consequence, some NT schools' capacity to perform a role in communicating SEAM requirements to parents and relevant stakeholders proved to be reasonably challenging. Qualitative information indicated that, as a result, parents and communities in some of the NT trial sites had limited understanding on the details of SEAM, including the aims of SEAM and their role in SEAM. It was also reported that, in the NT sites, there was a high level of misinformation circulating about SEAM and its implementation, which resulted in confusion. For example, people perceived SEAM as largely a 'big-stick' approach to dealing with attendance issues, and SEAM was seen by some parents to be solely directed at Indigenous children in remote areas.

Principals and staff from both NT and QLD schools interviewed in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork, however, reported that it was initially evident that families with chronic attendance problems responded to the SEAM message by making more effort to send their children to school.

### Communicating SEAM to local communities

A key element identified in the evaluation was the importance of community influence in SEAM implementation. Qualitative research showed that many local communities in NT and QLD were in support of a policy measure that was more punitive in nature to address attendance issues, and some community leaders had expressed a reasonable level of understanding of the SEAM trial. In some cases, however, it may not have been totally clear to the community that SEAM was different to the prosecution process under QLD and NT legislation, which was also punitive in nature. This was partly because the process of providing social work support, which was an important defining element of SEAM, was not necessarily well understood by the community. Feedback received from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork also indicated that in some remote communities, there was lack of early consultation with the local community which may have impeded the implementation of the trial. In addition, it was reported that, over time, lags in the SEAM process resulted in communities losing faith in the effectiveness of SEAM, despite being initially supportive.

### Communication about SEAM activities

In the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork, it was noted by school principals in NT sites that the lack of transparency in communication during the trial period had undermined the effectiveness of SEAM implementation. In particular, there was a lack of information on SEAM processes and outcomes, i.e. schools were not informed of the progress related to SEAM referrals (especially when attendance notices were issued or suspension of income support payments occurred). This situation arose since DHS was generally required to communicate SEAM related issues through the central education authority<sup>5</sup> in NT sites. As a result, it was not possible for DHS to directly communicate with schools. Principals and staff interviewed in QLD schools reported that they were not usually consulted on SEAM related decisions such as issuing a notice or payment suspension. The lack of smooth communication about SEAM activities in some QLD schools was related to the privacy concern which led to limited amount of customer information being shared between the DHS and schools.

### **Enrolment component under SEAM**

The enrolment component of the SEAM trial was designed to assist in reducing the number of students who were not enrolled at a school or an eligible education alternative. When the enrolment component was first implemented in the NT sites in 2009, it was a bulk mail out to all in-scope parents requesting enrolment details of their school-age child. From 2010, the process was changed into a enrolment information exchange process. That is, the enrolment component was implemented at the beginning of the school term through an exchange of enrolment details of in-scope children, conducted once a year in both the NT and QLD sites. A second information exchange process commenced mid-way through the year from 2011 in QLD sites to capture possible enrolment movements of SEAM students during the school year.

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<sup>5</sup> This rule was applied to government schools participating in SEAM during the trial period.

The effectiveness of the enrolment component was assessed by looking at the extent to which there was any impact on school enrolment of SEAM children. Specifically, analysis was undertaken to assess whether the introduction of a second enrolment information exchange process was effective in capturing enrolment movements of SEAM students.

- Over the trial period, there were 1473 parents (involving 2955 children) in the NT sites and 4793 parents (involving 8740 children) in QLD sites, who were ever in scope for the enrolment component of the SEAM trial. Parents in scope for SEAM were sent enrolment notification letters where enrolment information of their school-aged child was not available. Failure to provide enrolment details within the 14-day compliance period resulted in the suspension of SEAM parents' income support payment. It was reported that 161 parents (involving 231 children) in the NT sites and 180 parents (involving 255 children) in QLD sites had their income support payments suspended under the SEAM enrolment component. But no income support payment cancellations occurred.
- The overall enrolment compliance, in terms of in-scope parents providing enrolment details of their school-age child at various stages of the process, reached 100 per cent for periods over the trial in the NT and QLD, after excluding those who moved out of scope over time. A high compliance rate and no cancellation of income support payments under the SEAM enrolment component suggests that SEAM was successful in ensuring that compulsory school-age children in scope for SEAM were enrolled in school or an eligible education alternate, at the point when their enrolment details were verified.
- For parents who received the SEAM notification letter, 87 per cent in the NT and 95 per cent in QLD provided the enrolment details of their school-age child without having their income support payment suspended. This suggests that the threat of possible income support suspension from issuing an enrolment notification letter was generally sufficient to ensure the effectiveness of the enrolment component without progressing into a suspension of income support payments.
- Under the SEAM enrolment component, the enrolment information exchange process was initially conducted once a year to ascertain the enrolment details of in-scope children. It was a time-consuming manual process linking the income support customers with enrolment details of their child(ren) subject to SEAM. Although planned to be conducted at the beginning of the school year, the enrolment information exchange in reality took between three and four months to be completed. This meant that the earliest letters requesting enrolment details from parents were issued in May. As a result of this time lag, the measure ran the risk of any unenrolled students potentially missing nearly half of the school year at the time their enrolments were verified.
- A second enrolment information exchange was introduced mid-way through the year in 2011 in QLD trial sites, in order to capture enrolment movements of SEAM students. It was identified that increasing enrolment information exchanges to twice a year was not necessarily effective in ensuring the full year enrolment of SEAM students with high mobility.

- School enrolment is a dynamic process in the sense that families may move house and students may change schools from time to time. There is also qualitative evidence to suggest that some children in the NT may not be identified/captured in income support/schooling records, and are living in what is referred to as the 'Long Grass' for periods of time. But the lack of a national student enrolment data tracking system has prevented an understanding of exact numbers of unenrolled students or enrolment movements. For the SEAM enrolment component, given the inefficient manual information exchange process and point-in-time nature, the introduction of a second enrolment information exchange was still not an adequate solution to tackle the issue of enrolments and any potential enrolment breaks during the school year.

### **Attendance component under SEAM**

The attendance component of the SEAM trial was designed to assist in addressing non-attendance issues, particularly unauthorised absences. While the attendance referral model implemented in the NT<sup>6</sup> was automatic, the QLD attendance referral model was at the discretion of the school principals. The implementation of the automatic referral model in the NT used a pre-determined attendance benchmark<sup>7</sup> to identify students with attendance problems, which resulted in more consistency in referrals. But the automatic referral model was a data driven process which required the exchange of student attendance data every fortnight. The QLD attendance referral model gave school principals discretionary powers to determine referrals, based on their understanding of the issue and their knowledge of the family situation. Therefore, the discretionary nature of the QLD referral model meant that the referral could take place at any stage of the process, but it was also evident that some school principals in QLD sites decided not to use SEAM at all, i.e. they made no referrals.

### Impact analysis on SEAM effect

Central to the final evaluation of the SEAM trial was to identify the impact of the trial against a counterfactual. This involved measuring the average effect of the trial on the unauthorised absence rate of SEAM students, compared to what would have occurred in the absence of the trial by using a statistically selected student comparison group. The analysis was conducted by adjusting for demographic factors (such as age, gender and Indigenous status) and various family circumstances (such as being in a persistently jobless family, parent having a reported medical condition, parent being in a vulnerable situation, having a change in the child care arrangement and having moved house). The findings from the impact analysis show that:

- For SEAM students attending NT DET schools (i.e. government schools), no statistically significant effect from the SEAM trial was detected on reducing students'

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<sup>6</sup> Note that for the attendance component initially implemented in the NT in 2009 the referral was made at the discretion of school principals. This was changed to an automatic referral process in 2010.

<sup>7</sup> The attendance benchmark refers to more than five unauthorised absences in a ten week period (or less than 90 per cent attendance).

average rate of unauthorised absences throughout the trial, even when controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances. The average SEAM effect was a reduction in unauthorised absences (2.44 percentage points for the first year of the trial and by 0.19 percentage points over the trial).

- For SEAM students attending NT CEO schools (i.e. non-government Catholic schools), a statistically significant effect of the SEAM trial on reducing unauthorised absences was observed. When controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances, a reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was statistically significant for SEAM students (8.16 percentage points in the first year and 6.09 percentage points over the entire trial), compared to the comparison group. The SEAM effect was mostly observed early in the trial and diminished as the trial progressed.
- The difference in outcomes between Catholic schools and government schools in the NT may be partly because SEAM was trialed in fewer, more homogenous NT CEO schools with the largest participating school very supportive of SEAM and also being supported by regular social work service for a large part of the trial as evident from the qualitative research undertaken. There were more NT DET schools involved in SEAM, suggesting more diverse school and community environments. Therefore, if there was a statistically significant effect for SEAM students in some participating government schools, it was likely to have been offset by insignificant results in other schools, when the average SEAM effect was measured across all NT DET schools. Moreover, there was a much higher proportion of NT CEO parents who were issued with an attendance notice who also received social work support than NT DET parents. As discussed below, social work support does appear to have been an important factor in success of the attendance component of SEAM.
- In both Logan and remote sites in QLD, it was evident that, on average, SEAM was effective in reducing unauthorised absences for the first year of the trial. For SEAM students in Logan sites, when accounting for demographic factors and family circumstances, the impact result was statistically significant for the first year of the trial (unauthorised absences reduced by 0.72 percentage points). Over the trial, unauthorised absences, on average, reduced by 0.43 percentage points for SEAM students compared to the comparison group, although this result was not statistically significant.<sup>8</sup>
- For SEAM students in QLD remote sites, compared to the comparison group, when adjusted for demographic factors and family circumstances, the average SEAM effect was a statistically significant reduction in unauthorised absences (9.21 percentage points) for the first year of the trial. Over the trial, unauthorised absences reduced by 1.11 percentage points for SEAM students, compared to the comparison group, but the result was not statistically significant.
- Due to the discretionary nature of the attendance referral model implemented in QLD, participating schools were free to decide if they used SEAM to make referrals.

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<sup>8</sup> Compared to unadjusted estimates (i.e. when associated factors were not included in the analysis), adjusted estimates were more sensitive to the sample and cell size when broken down by these factors, which could be too small to detect statistical significance.

As previously noted, some school principals in Logan did not use SEAM at all. Further analysis of QLD results suggests that the SEAM effect was more likely to have been sustained for students in SEAM schools in Logan sites which were actively participating (i.e. where attendance notices were ever issued under SEAM). Restricting the analysis it was found that, when controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances, the average SEAM effect was a statistically significant reduction in unauthorised absences (1.45 percentage points in the first year and 0.94 percentage points over the trial period) for SEAM students attending schools where SEAM attendance notices were issued. This suggests that the appropriate use of SEAM along with a suite of measures<sup>9</sup> helped these participating schools to effectively address unauthorised absences. In contrast, for SEAM schools in Logan which were inactive in participating in SEAM where no SEAM attendance notices were issued, there was a higher rate of unauthorised absences (1.04 percentage points in the first year and 1.14 percentage points over the trial) for SEAM students, compared to comparison students.

- Where the average SEAM effect was statistically significant, the proportional size of the effect was more substantial for SEAM students in remote sites than suburban sites such as Logan. This is because students in remote sites generally had experienced more severe unauthorised absence issues, and thus there was greater potential for improvement.
- The impact from the SEAM trial may be different for different family circumstances, in particular, families reporting medical conditions or being in a vulnerable situation. The analysis showed that a statistically significant reduction in unauthorised absences was found for NT DET students (5.47 percentage points in the first year of the trial and by 7.13 percentage points over the trial period) and QLD Logan students (1.02 percentage points in the first year of the trial), who were from families ever reporting medical conditions. A reduction in unauthorised absences was also found to be statistically significant for NT DET students (7.00 percentage points in the first year and 5.28 percentage points over the trial period) who were from families ever reporting to be in a vulnerable situation. A similar result was also found for SEAM students in QLD Logan sites where the family reported being in a vulnerable position (unauthorised absences reduced by 1.04 percentage points in the first year and over the trial period). A key factor in the positive impact of SEAM for those reporting medical conditions and vulnerabilities is likely to have been the additional social work support provided under SEAM.

#### *Relationship between demographic factors and unauthorised absences*

As explained earlier, the impact analysis included accounting for relevant demographic characteristics and various family circumstances. Unauthorised absences were found to be positively correlated with age and being an Indigenous student, and were generally higher

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<sup>9</sup> Most SEAM schools in QLD Logan sites were also involved in the Every Child Counts initiative and the Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities initiative over the same period as the SEAM trial.

with the presence of family circumstances such as being in a persistently jobless family, having a change in the care arrangement of students and having moved house. For estimates that were statistically significant, it was found that, over the trial period:

- With an additional one year in age, unauthorised absences were higher by 3.76 percentage points, 2.97 percentage points, 0.36 percentage points and 1.20 percentage points respectively for NT DET, NT CEO, QLD Logan and QLD remote SEAM students. For SEAM students in Logan who were identified with Indigenous status, unauthorised absences increased by 0.96 percentage points.
- Unauthorised absences were higher by 0.75 percentage points for SEAM students in Logan sites if they came from a persistently jobless family, by 0.89 percentage points if there was a change in the child care arrangement, and by 0.73 percentage points if they had moved house. Similarly for SEAM students in QLD remote sites, unauthorised absences were higher by 6.16 percentage points if there was a change in the child care arrangement and by 8.31 percentage points for those who had moved house.

### Threat effect

A key consideration in the SEAM trial was that the change in behaviour was likely to be motivated by the threat of possible suspension of income support payments rather than the actual suspension. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis showed that the reduction in unauthorised absences was largely attributable to the threat effect under SEAM.

- The observed positive effect of SEAM at an early stage in the trial (i.e. the first year of the trial) suggests that the threat effect was present at the commencement of the trial, in line with what would be expected from a deterrent strategy such as SEAM. The qualitative information collected was also consistent with this result, which showed that the threat effect occurred when parents became aware of the trial.
- There was qualitative evidence to suggest that the threat effect also occurred when SEAM messages and requirements were further communicated to parents, e.g. when parents were issued with a SEAM notice, or were contacted by the DHS social worker.
- Over the whole trial, there were 1303 parents (involving 2497 children) in the NT and 3085 parents (involving 5439 children) in QLD who were ever in scope for the attendance component of the SEAM trial. This included 395 parents (30.3 per cent) in the NT and 127 parents (4.1 per cent) in QLD who were issued with an attendance notice. Among parents who received SEAM attendance notices, 119 NT parents (involving 162 children) and only 3 QLD parents (involving 6 children) had their income support payments suspended. Two SEAM parents in the NT ended up with the cancellation of their income support payments. This information suggests that the threat effect was influential in changing behaviour.
- In NT DET sites, the observed SEAM effect was not sustained throughout the trial. Qualitative information suggests that families were receptive to the trial and schools were encouraged by the reaction at the initial stage of the trial. Practical difficulties and challenges arising from the implementation of the SEAM trial, however, had limited its effectiveness over time. It was noted that the threat had not been backed

up by prompt responses and implications such as suspension in payments and thus the behavioural change was not sustained.

- From the fieldwork undertaken for the evaluation, school principals in QLD Logan sites reported that parents discussed amongst themselves the implications of SEAM and there seemed to be a response either to positively respond or in some cases, move out of scope. It was noted by school staff in QLD that some parents were unaware that the trial ceased in mid-2012, and consequently the threat of SEAM continued to have an effect.

#### Effect of social work contact

The provision of social work contact by DHS was one of the critical and most positive elements for the SEAM trial. The support services were intended to address complex barriers that SEAM families experienced. The implementation of SEAM acted as a trigger for social work contact with families which may not have occurred otherwise.

- Under SEAM, DHS social workers were required to make contact with parents of referred students who received an attendance notice. Given the possible suspension of income support payments for failure to comply with SEAM requirements, social work contact was critical in supporting referred families. This was despite that, in some cases, parents may decline the offer of the social work support or were not able to be contacted.
- It was found that referred students in the NT CEO schools had the highest proportion (70 per cent) receiving social work contact, while just over half of NT DET referred students and around one-third of QLD referred students received social work contact. Overall, SEAM families who received social work contact accounted for 57.4 per cent of families that were actually referred.
- Consistent with the finding from the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, social worker contact helped to reduce unauthorised absences of referred students during the compliance period. In most cases, a single contact from social workers may have been sufficient to positively ensure compliance by in-scope parents. For some very complex cases, however, the support being provided under SEAM was intensive, and on-going follow-up and long-term interventions were required to ensure change in behaviour.
- Across SEAM as a whole, the reduction in unauthorised absences for referred students during the 28-day compliance period was substantial for some students, although a relapse tended to occur post compliance period. It was found, for those with social work contact, the relapse was likely to occur to a lesser extent.

The effectiveness of social work contact under SEAM was dependent on the attendance referral model within which social work contact operated. It was more challenging for social workers in the NT sites to provide support under the automatic referral process and using a remote servicing model. But for social work contact in QLD, particularly in Logan, the support was more intensive and targeted, although similar challenges to those in the NT arose in QLD remote sites as a result of use of the remote servicing model.

- In the NT, the automatic referral model presented a logistical challenge for social workers given a larger number of referrals were taking place within a short



timeframe. The delay in the data exchange process also impeded prompt action in response to attendance issues. Due to privacy concerns, social workers were constrained to some extent in their interaction with schools, as any information related to a parent being issued with an attendance notice and/or suspended was not allowed to be disclosed to relevant schools unless the parent gave permission for this information to be disclosed to a third party.

- In QLD, particularly in Logan sites, the support provided by social workers was directed to more complex cases with more frequent contacts being offered, since the referral was at the discretion of school principals and better targeting was possible. Qualitative evidence suggests that social workers also generally had a good rapport with schools and the interaction with schools was effective.
- In remote communities in both the NT and QLD sites, social workers experienced difficulties in providing services effectively. The remote servicing meant social work support was possibly not available on time for those needing it. Staff turnover was reported to be high over the trial period, which presented challenges in ensuring a consistent approach in remote servicing. A lack of material aid services in these communities also meant that social workers could not refer customers onto further services, particularly during suspension periods.

The effect of social work contact is a contributing factor to the SEAM evaluation results, and as is evident, the additional support from social work contact seemed to have led to a positive impact for those with broad vulnerabilities. Such an effect is also largely dependent on the level and adequacy of the support which varies with the actual situation and its complexity. Therefore, the effect of social work contact for a particular subgroup (e.g. those with broad vulnerabilities), although statistically significant, was masked at the aggregate level.

### Changing behaviour

The threat of possible suspensions of income support payments and the offer of social work contact under SEAM served to encourage behaviour change in relation to school enrolment and attendance. Most SEAM parents/students seemed to have responded positively to SEAM, at least in the immediate term. But for a small number of SEAM parents/students, multiple notices and suspensions did not lead to an immediate reaction and a sustained change. This suggests that it was not possible to fully address the complex and multiple barriers some SEAM families faced in a short time period, and long-term interventions and intensive follow-up services were required to ensure sustained behaviour change.

- In NT sites, the attendance referral was made according to a pre-determined attendance benchmark<sup>10</sup>. It was found that most parents had taken all required reasonable steps defined by education authorities in the period from when they were first referred for their child's attendance issues but before an attendance notice was issued. The most common reasonable step taken by parents was to

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<sup>10</sup> Note that for the attendance component initially implemented in the NT in 2009 the referral was made at the discretion of school principals. This was changed to an automatic referral process in 2010.

immediately notify the school of their child's absence. In this case, by taking reasonable steps, parents would not have been issued with an attendance notice.

- While parents were deemed to be taking action to address attendance issues, parents' effort did not always lead to an improvement in the child's attendance behaviour. This may suggest that some families may have faced additional barriers which thwarted their attempts to make sure their child attended school.
- An analysis of the occurrence of notices issued and payment suspensions shows that there were only a small number of parents of referred students who were issued with more than one notice (covering 75 NT DET students, 150 NT CEO students and 27 QLD students) or whose income support payment was suspended more than once (9 NT DET students, 36 NT CEO students and 3 QLD students).
- For those cases where only one notice was issued, most SEAM parents were motivated by the threat of suspension leading to a positive gain in attendance. For those who responded positively to the threat effect, it was possible to observe their immediate behaviour change through their compliance with SEAM attendance requirements, and there were no further referrals or suspensions imposed.
- For complex cases where the threat effect did not result in an immediate reaction and where further referrals occurred and notices issued, families tended to relapse after social work support was withdrawn. The observed relapse is not unusual, as change in behaviour generally occurs in stages over time and the movement through these stages is rather cyclical. Given the multiple barriers these families encountered which required long-term interventions; it may be beyond the scope of the SEAM trial to fully address all the issues these families faced with respect to school attendance.

### **Lessons Learnt from the SEAM trial**

As for any social policy trial like SEAM, the evaluation is intended to facilitate learning and on-going refinement of policy. Findings from the evaluation are also expected to inform future policy development in relevant areas.

Implementation of the SEAM trial was motivated by evidence on the importance of parental efforts in encouraging education and the need to break intergenerational disadvantage through improved attendance leading to better schooling outcomes. Findings suggest that it was generally acknowledged by school principals, education authorities and some communities that a policy measure like SEAM (with the threat of punitive action and provision of social work support) could be part of a suite of strategies for improving school enrolment and attendance.

The evaluation of the SEAM trial, however, has highlighted some challenges and lessons to be learnt in translating potentially good policy into policy that is effectively implemented to achieve intended outcomes. Areas for consideration for the refinement of SEAM and future SEAM-type policy development and implementation include:

- Effective communication is the first step towards influencing behavioural change. Raising awareness of the measure among stakeholder groups and ensuring a good understanding of related requirements are essential to the success of policy

implementation. Early engagement and greater consultation with the wider community is a necessary part of any implementation strategy.

- Making good use of local knowledge appears to be a critical part for the success of policy implementation. The approach thus requires a local focus by working in partnership with schools and local communities and actively involving frontline agencies to be an active part of implementation.
- The implementation of SEAM involves interactions among Commonwealth, state and territory governments, and education authorities. This has provided opportunities for increased inter-agency collaboration and mutual understanding. Improved collaboration could possibly be achieved through increased communication and better consultation across agencies at the planning stage and during the implementation. A well-developed, detailed and encompassing implementation plan was also considered to be critical to ensure the consistency and efficiency of the implementation in the face of high staff turnover over the trial period.
- The enrolment information exchange process under SEAM was a time-consuming data process which involved manually linking DHS data with enrolment data provided by education authorities. Such a process only verified point-in time enrolment details, so was not adequate in identifying enrolment movements. Currently there is no enrolment data sharing between different schooling systems or across education authorities of different jurisdictions. Therefore, a national enrolment data tracking system is needed to effectively keep track of changes in school enrolment over time.
- The SEAM referral process, in particular the automatic attendance referral, was a data driven process. To effectively implement this process, a high level of IT capacity was required for data exchange. However, no funding was provided to build an IT system to exchange the attendance data during the trial period. Consequently, the process was a manual one and existing data systems appeared to be struggling with the intensive data tasks arising from such a process, which may have jeopardized the effectiveness of SEAM implementation to some extent. Therefore, it is important to align the IT/data capability with practical implementation requirements for an effective implementation process.
- The provision of support services is a critical part of a deterrent strategy like SEAM. The social work contact under SEAM faced challenges in dealing with complex barriers families encountered. The support these families required proved to be intensive and needed to be on an on-going basis which usually extended beyond the compliance period. The strengths based approach is considered by social workers to be an effective practice when providing support. This approach rewards improvements in behaviour and builds on strengths by setting goals and capitalising on small steps forward. It has been suggested that incorporating this approach into the design and implementation of SEAM so that it was possible to measure interim outcomes to improving school attendance may have improved the effectiveness of SEAM.

## INTRODUCTION

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The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) trial was first announced in the 2008-09 Budget.<sup>11</sup> The measure formed part of the National Welfare Payments Reform Agenda with the aim to trial the attachment of schooling requirements to income support payments. The policy intent was to encourage parents in receipt of income support payments to ensure their children of compulsory school age were enrolled in and attended schools regularly.

The SEAM trial was introduced from January 2009 in 14 schools across six sites in the Northern Territory (NT). An additional six trial sites, including 30 schools, began in selected Queensland (QLD) locations during October 2009. The trial ended on 30 June 2012 in both the NT and QLD trial sites.

The SEAM trial was continuously monitored and periodically evaluated to provide information on the on-going progress of its implementation and impact. The 2009 SEAM Evaluation Report examined the implementation and outcomes of the SEAM trial in the NT in 2009. The 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report which was publicly released in February 2012 covered the evaluation findings on SEAM implementation and its impact on school enrolment and attendance in QLD in late 2009 and 2010 as well as findings for the NT in 2010.

This report is the final evaluation of the SEAM trial. It uses a mixed method approach (quantitative and qualitative analysis) to evaluate the implementation of the SEAM trial and its effectiveness over the entire trial period. The purpose of the final evaluation is to provide evidence on whether the SEAM trial achieved its desired outcomes, and to inform further policy development in relevant areas.

The report is structured into an Executive Summary plus two distinct parts. The Executive Summary presents key evaluation findings from the SEAM trial and highlights challenges and lessons learnt. Part One outlines the policy context of the SEAM trial and its operational settings, and the evaluation approach to the SEAM trial including the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial and key evaluation questions. Part Two provides details of findings from quantitative and qualitative analysis about the implementation and the impact of the SEAM trial.

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<sup>11</sup> SEAM was announced in the 2008-09 Budget to be a three-year trial funded by the National Welfare Reform Initiative. In the NT, the trial commenced in January 2009, and in QLD, it began in October 2009. In the 2010-11 Federal Budget, the SEAM trial was extended for another 12 months from July 2011 in both the NT and QLD under funding from the Building Australia's Future Workforce package.

## **PART ONE: THE SEAM TRIAL AND EVALUATION OVERVIEW**

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### **1. WHAT IS THE SEAM TRIAL?**

#### **1.1. Objectives of the SEAM trial**

The SEAM trial was introduced in response to the Australian Government's commitment to improving education outcomes for children. There is evidence that supports the existence of a negative cycle whereby poor school attendance (which is associated with low socioeconomic status, Indigenous status and remoteness) is likely to result in poor education outcomes, which in turn are related to an increased likelihood of welfare dependency and unemployment. SEAM was designed to assist in breaking this cycle by improving school enrolment and attendance of students whose parents were in receipt of income support payments.

The intention of SEAM was to test whether the possible suspension of income support payments, along with the offer of social work contact provided by DHS, could be an effective incentive to improve school enrolment and to address unauthorised absence issues.

The desired outcomes for the SEAM trial were:

- Increased awareness of SEAM among parents and school communities.
- Increased engagement and participation by schools in SEAM.
- SEAM parents taking reasonable steps to address their child's attendance issues
- Improved enrolment in school by SEAM children.
- Improved attendance of SEAM students as measured by a reduction in unauthorised absences.

A program logic analysis of the measure which maps out inputs, outputs and expected outcomes for the SEAM trial is presented at [Appendix 1](#).

The two components of the measure – enrolment and attendance – were implemented as distinct elements of the trial. Both enrolment and attendance components started in the NT in January 2009 while in QLD, staggered implementation resulted in the attendance component beginning in October 2009 followed by the enrolment component in January 2010.

#### **1.2. SEAM trial sites and participating schools**

The SEAM trial was introduced in six NT sites situated in remote and very remote areas with mainly Indigenous populations<sup>12</sup> in January 2009. The trial sites in the NT were:

- Katherine Township<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> All sites except Katherine Township were prescribed communities under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). SEAM was not specific to remote Indigenous communities or associated with the NTER.

- Katherine Town Camps
- Hermannsburg
- Wallace Rockhole
- The Tiwi Islands
- Wadeye.

These six trial sites in the NT included 14 schools (nine government and five non-government) participating in SEAM, as listed in Table 1.2.1. The table also shows the average number of enrolled students who were in scope for SEAM, relative to the average school enrolment. From 2009 to 2011, half of the SEAM schools in the NT consisted of more than 50 per cent of enrolled students being in scope for SEAM. Nevertheless, the percentage of students in scope for SEAM varied widely across schools, ranging from nine per cent to as high as 87 per cent.

An additional six trial sites in selected QLD locations in suburban Logan in the south of Brisbane and remote communities in the far north of the state, started in the SEAM trial in October 2009. The trial sites in QLD were:

- Logan Central
- Kingston
- Woodridge
- Eagleby
- Doomadgee<sup>14</sup>
- Mornington Island.

The six trial sites in QLD included 30 government schools participating in SEAM, as listed in Table 1.2.2. Two thirds of SEAM schools in the Logan area had 30 per cent of enrolled students being in scope for SEAM, while both SEAM schools in the very remote area had over half of their students in scope for SEAM.

Generally, the students who were not in scope for SEAM either were not of compulsory school age or had no parent receiving an eligible income support payment.

Maps of SEAM trial sites in the NT and QLD are presented at [Appendix 2](#) and [Appendix 3](#).

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<sup>13</sup> Katherine Township and Katherine Town Camps are classified as remote areas under the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The remaining four sites in the NT are all classified as very remote areas.

<sup>14</sup> Doomadgee and Mornington Island are classified as very remote areas under the ASGC. For the remaining four sites in QLD the AGSC classification is major city.

Table 1.2.1: Average annual number of SEAM student enrolments by site and participating school in the NT from 2009 to 2011<sup>15</sup>

SEAM site	School name	Institution type	School type	Average annual number of SEAM children enrolled*	Average annual number of children enrolled**	Percentage of children enrolled who were in SEAM (%)
Hermannsburg	Ntaria School	Government	Primary and secondary	96	160	60.3
Katherine Township***	Casuarina Street Primary	Government	Primary	22	244	8.9
	Clyde Fenton Primary School	Government	Primary	122	232	52.7
	Katherine High School	Government	Secondary	147	586	25.1
	Katherine South Primary School	Government	Primary	81	264	30.8
	MacFarlane Primary School	Government	Primary	187	214	87.4
	St Joseph's School	Catholic	Primary and secondary	47	309	15.2
Tiwi Islands	Milikipati School	Government	Primary	45	67	67.3
	Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School	Catholic	Primary	144	205	70.1
	Pularumpi School	Government	Primary	38	62	61.0
	Tiwi College	Non-government <sup>16</sup>	Primary and secondary	25	72	34.4
	Xavier Catholic College	Catholic	Secondary	40	88	45.3
Wadeye	Our Lady Of The Sacred Heart Port Keats	Catholic	Primary and secondary	337	428	78.7
Wallace Rockhole	Wallace Rockhole School	Government	Primary and secondary	9	24	35.6
<b>Total</b>				<b>1341</b>	<b>2956</b>	<b>45.3</b>

\* Based on enrolment data collected by DHS from 2009 to 2011.

\*\* Based on MySchool enrolment data from 2009 to 2011.

<sup>15</sup>Only half year enrolment data was available for 2012 so 2012 enrolment data was not included in this table. The same data limitation was applied to Table 1.2.2.

<sup>16</sup>Tiwi College is owned and operated by the Tiwi people through the Tiwi Education Board representing all Tiwi families and communities (source: Tiwi College website).

\*\*\* Katherine Town Camps is not included in the table as no school is located in this trial site. Children in Katherine Town Camps usually attended schools in Katherine.

**Table 1.2.2 Average annual number of SEAM student enrolments by site and participating school in QLD from 2010 to 2011**

SEAM site	School name	Institution type	School type	Average annual number of SEAM children enrolled*	Average annual number of children enrolled**	Percentage of children enrolled who were in SEAM (%)
Logan Central Kingston Woodridge Eagleby	Beenleigh State High School	Government	Secondary	165	968	17.0
	Beenleigh State School	Government	Primary	87	439	19.8
	Beenleigh Special School	Government/Special	Primary and secondary	11	91	11.6
	Berrinba East State School	Government	Primary	184	504	36.5
	Burrowes State School	Government	Primary	46	719	6.3
	Carbrook State School	Government	Primary	11	363	3.0
	Crestmead State School	Government	Primary	23	975	2.4
	Eagleby State School	Government	Primary	165	347	47.6
	Eagleby South State School	Government	Primary	143	290	49.3
	Harris Fields State School	Government	Primary	205	494	41.5
	Kimberley Park State School	Government	Primary	16	878	1.8
	Kingston College	Government	Secondary	136	694	19.5
	Kingston State School	Government	Primary	279	590	47.2
	Logan City Special School	Government/Special	Primary and secondary	24	126	19.0
	Loganholme State School	Government	Primary	20	439	4.6
	Loganlea State High School	Government	Secondary	53	718	7.3
	Mabel Park State High School	Government	Secondary	119	462	25.7
	Mabel Park State School	Government	Primary	250	704	35.5
	Marsden State High School	Government	Secondary	82	1781	4.6
	Marsden State School	Government	Primary	39	977	3.9
	Shailer Park State High School	Government	Secondary	28	829	3.3
	Shailer Park State School	Government	Primary	22	494	4.4
	Slacks Creek State School	Government	Primary	15	258	5.8
	Waterford State School	Government	Primary	15	619	2.4
	Waterford West State School	Government	Primary	22	611	3.5
	Woodridge State High School	Government	Secondary	328	939	34.9
	Woodridge State School	Government	Primary	445	694	64.2
Woodridge North State School	Government	Primary	245	492	49.7	
Doomadgee	Doomadgee State School	Government	Preparatory – Year 10	199	309	64.5
Mornington Island	Mornington Island State School	Government	Preparatory – Year 10	148	286	51.6
<b>Total</b>				<b>3519</b>	<b>18083</b>	<b>19.5</b>

\* Based on DHS enrolment data from 2010 to 2011 \*\* Based on MySchool enrolment data from 2010 to 2011.



## 2. POLICY CONTEXT AND OPERATIONAL SETTING OF THE SEAM TRIAL

### 2.1. Policy context of the SEAM trial

It is the primary responsibility of state and territory education authorities to respond to school enrolment and attendance issues, through the relevant legislative framework. All jurisdictions include reference to compulsory school attendance in their education legislation, which asserts that each parent of a child who is of compulsory school age has the legal obligation to ensure their child is enrolled and attends school or participates in an education institution or eligible schooling alternative on every school day.

SEAM was one of the many school enrolment and attendance measures being pursued by the Australian Government and state and territory governments, which invested in targeted approaches to improve school attendance.

SEAM did not override the primary responsibility of state and territory education authorities; rather, it was intended to provide an additional tool and complement existing strategies to help resolve intractable cases of non-enrolment or poor attendance. In particular, SEAM was introduced as a trial to see whether the possible suspension of income support payments, along with the offer of DHS social work contact could be an effective motivation to improve school enrolment and attendance. SEAM is not an Indigenous specific measure.

A more detailed description of policy initiatives for improving school enrolment and attendance is presented at [Appendix 4](#).

### 2.2. Operational settings of the SEAM trial

#### 2.2.1. Schooling requirements for social security payments

The *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Act 2008 (the Act)*<sup>17</sup> gave legislative effect to enabling the implementation of the SEAM trial. Based on the Act, *the Guide to Social Security Law* clearly states that

(SEAM) is a measure that provides the offer of social work support to help parents overcome barriers to school enrolment and attendance, and as a last resort, the possible suspension of parents' income support payments to ensure that their children are enrolled in and regularly attending school.<sup>18</sup>

SEAM applies to parents whose residential address is in a SEAM trial location, who were receiving a schooling requirement payment<sup>19</sup> and who had care of a school-age child who

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<sup>17</sup> This Act amended the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999*

<sup>18</sup> Source: Australian Government, "*Guide to Social Security Law*"

<sup>19</sup> Schooling requirement payments include a range of Social Security Benefit payments, Social Security Pensions and some of the Department of Veterans' Affairs payments.

was required to be enrolled at or attend a school. Parents who did not comply with their requirements under SEAM may have their schooling requirement payment suspended.

The former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) had policy responsibility for this measure and worked collaboratively with the former Australian Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), Australian Department of Human Services (DHS), and state and territory governments. Given the trial sites were located in the NT and QLD, the former Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (NT DET) and Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (QLD DETE) were stakeholders for the government schools involved in the SEAM trial. The Northern Territory Catholic Education Office (NT CEO) was also the stakeholder for the participating Catholic schools in the NT. DHS had the responsibility to manage the administration of SEAM customers from its data system containing income support payment recipients.

Therefore the implementation of the SEAM trial involved interactions among Commonwealth, state and territory governments, education authorities and participating schools.

### 2.2.2. Enrolment and attendance components of the SEAM trial

The SEAM trial consisted of two clearly defined components – the enrolment component and the attendance component.

#### **SEAM enrolment component**

The enrolment component of SEAM was designed to assist in reducing the number of children who were of compulsory school age but were not enrolled in an educational institution or eligible schooling alternative. The enrolment component of the SEAM trial was officially commenced in Term 1, 2009 in the NT and Term 1, 2010 in QLD.

The enrolment component was made up of two parts: enrolment information exchange performed by DHS to gather enrolment details for in-scope students at the start of the school year, and an ongoing process to collect enrolment details for students who came into scope for SEAM throughout the year. An in-scope parent was issued with an enrolment notification letter if the enrolment details of their school-age child were not found through linking enrolment data and SEAM customer data. For notified parents who failed to provide the requested enrolment details within the 14-day compliance period, their income support

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Social Security Benefit – Widow Allowance, Youth Allowance, Newstart Allowance (NSA), Sickness Allowance, Partner Allowance, Mature Age Allowance, Parenting Payment Partnered, Austudy, Special Benefit, and Parenting Allowance

Social Security Pension – Parenting Payment Single (PPS), Parenting Payment Partnered (PPP), Disability Support Pension (DSP), Bereavement Allowance, Age Pension, Carer Payment, Wife Pension, Mature Age Partner Allowance, Widow B Pension, Sole Parent Pension, Disability Wage Supplement, and Special Needs Pension

Department of Veterans' Affairs – Service Pension, Income Support Supplement, and Defence Force Income Support Allowance

payments were consequently suspended unless there was a reasonable excuse or special circumstance.

The detailed description of the enrolment component of the SEAM trial is presented in [Appendix 5](#).

### **SEAM attendance component**

The attendance component of SEAM was designed to assist in identifying students in income support families who had problems with attendance and put in place assistance to help these families address unauthorised absence issues. The attendance component of the SEAM trial was officially commenced in January 2009 in the NT and in October 2009 in QLD.

Parents in scope for the SEAM attendance component were required to take reasonable steps to ensure their child attended school regularly. A referral to DHS was made if the parent failed to comply with SEAM attendance requirements. In the NT, an automatic attendance referral model was implemented<sup>20</sup>, while the QLD attendance referral model was at the discretion of school principals. The automatic attendance referral in the NT made use of a pre-determined benchmark<sup>21</sup> to identify students with attendance problems, but it was a data driven process which required intensive data exchange occurring every fortnight. The discretionary approach in QLD allowed school principals to make referrals based on their local knowledge about the issue and the family situation.

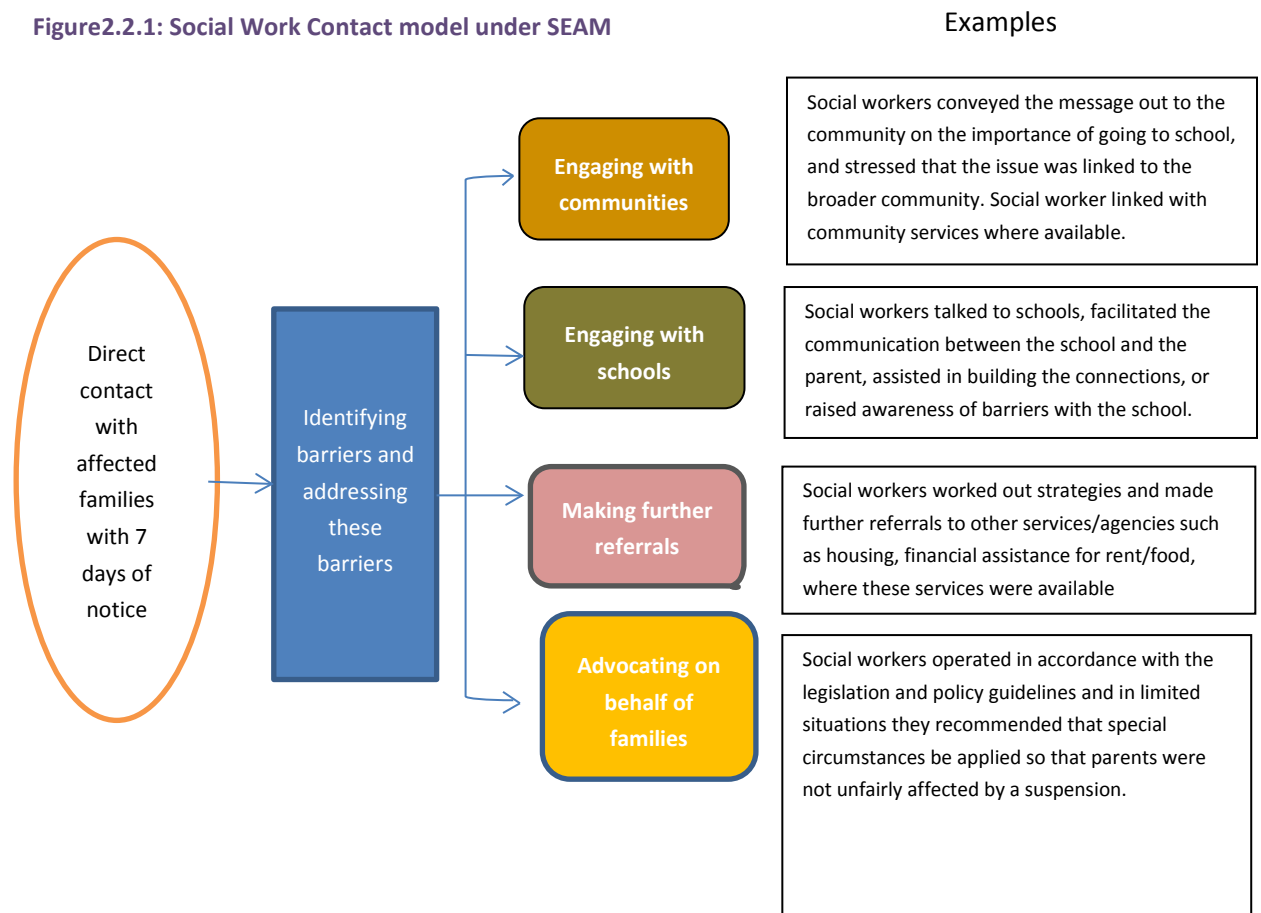
Where a parent was not taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance, an attendance notice was issued by DHS to the parent who then had 28 days to take reasonable steps to address their child's attendance issues. Social work contact was offered by DHS to the referred parent during the compliance period to assist the parent in addressing complex barriers. The role of social work contact under SEAM is illustrated in Figure 2.2.1.

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<sup>20</sup> Note that for the attendance component initially implemented in the NT in 2009 the referral was made at the discretion of school principals. This was changed to an automatic referral process in 2010.

<sup>21</sup>The attendance benchmark refers to more than five unauthorised absences in a ten week period (or less than 90 per cent attendance).

Figure 2.2.1: Social Work Contact model under SEAM



If the parent was not taking reasonable steps to ensure their child attended school regularly, the suspension of income support payments occurred as a consequence.

The detailed description of the attendance component of the SEAM trial is presented at [Appendix 6](#).

### 2.2.3. Process changes over the SEAM trial period

Over the period of the SEAM trial, findings from monitoring and interim evaluations prompted changes to the referral process to reduce administrative burden and to improve the efficiency of the process in addressing problems with enrolment and attendance. In summary, major changes in relation to the SEAM process included:

- A enrolment information exchange was conducted between DHS and the education authorities in the NT and QLD at the beginning of 2010 to replace the original process of DHS requesting enrolment details for each child of compulsory school age from SEAM parents.
- From 2011, an enrolment information exchange was conducted twice a year (in Term 1 and Term 3) between DHS and QLD DETE. This process only occurred in 2011, as the trial ended in June 2012.
- In the attendance referral process, an automatic referral using a benchmark of unsatisfactory school attendance was introduced in the NT during July 2010, to replace the original attendance referral which was at the discretion of school

principals. The attendance benchmark referred to more than five unauthorised absences in a 10-week period (which equates to a 90 per cent or less attendance).

A detailed key policy timeline is presented at [Appendix 7](#) for the enrolment component and [Appendix 8](#) for the attendance component.

### 2.3. Participating population in the SEAM trial

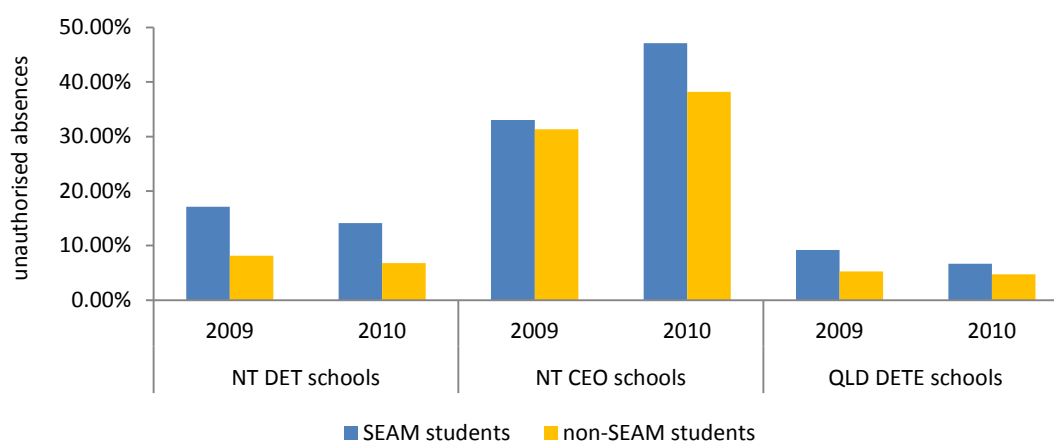
Under the SEAM legislation, parents in receipt of a schooling requirement payment may be eligible for being included in SEAM provided other relevant conditions were met. That is, the SEAM trial had a focus on families in receipt of income support in relation to school enrolment and attendance of their school-age child.

As discussed, school enrolment and attendance are essential requirements for each school-age child to be engaged with their education. The attendance component of the SEAM trial was designed to address unauthorised absences. Given the target population of the SEAM trial, the underlying assumption is that the students subject to SEAM may be more likely to experience unauthorised absence issues than their non-SEAM peers.

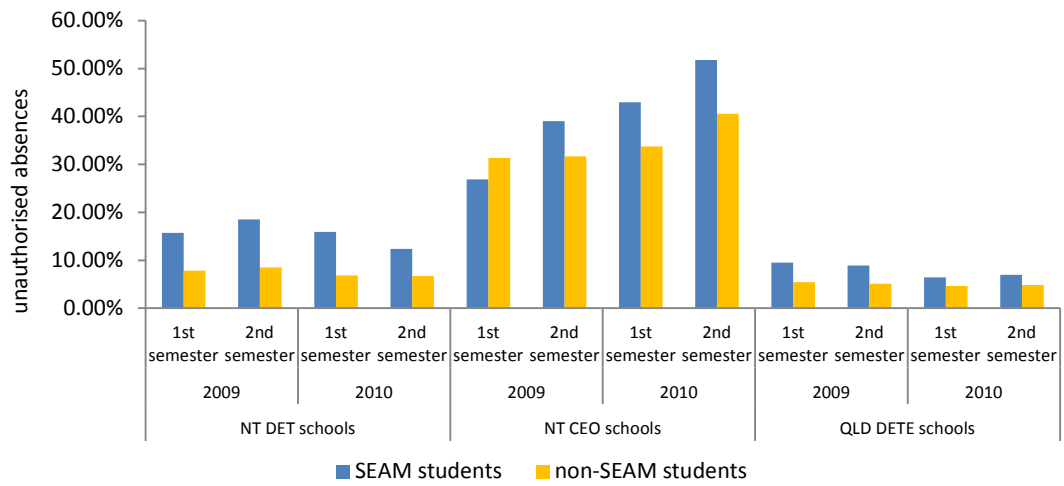
The analysis in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report indicated that the attendance of SEAM students was 10 percentage points lower than their non-SEAM peers in NT DET and QLD DETE schools participating in SEAM during 2009 and 2010. The poorer attendance of SEAM students was largely due to the higher rate of unauthorised absences.

In this section, student attendance data provided by the NT CEO which was not available previously is also included to examine the unauthorised absence pattern, in addition to NT DET and QLD DETE data. The findings show a similar pattern from NT CEO data to the previous analysis using NT DET and QLD DETE data. As shown in Figure 2.3.1 and 2.3.2, the rate of unauthorised absences was, on average, higher across SEAM students whose attendance data were available than their non-SEAM counterparts for the NT and QLD schools participating in SEAM. These findings indicated that SEAM had appropriately targeted the problem of unauthorised absences.

**Figure 2.3.1: Average rate of unauthorised absences of SEAM and non-SEAM students, 2009-2010**



**Figure 2.3.2: Average rate of unauthorised absences of SEAM and non-SEAM students by semester, 2009-2010**



### 3. THEORY OF CHANGE FOR THE SEAM TRIAL

#### 3.1. What is the Theory of Change?

As with any social policy trials/programmes, the SEAM trial has assumptions inherent in it about how and why the trial will work. To evaluate the SEAM trial, it is important to identify the assumptions underpinning SEAM trial activities, and to link these to the expected outcomes of the trial (as defined in the Program Logic at [Appendix 1](#)) in a theoretical framework. The 'Theory of Change' framework was selected as the underpinning theoretical approach for this evaluation.<sup>22</sup>

The Theory of Change is an approach that maps the pathways under the social programme, which relate the desired behavioural change to potential reasons for triggering the change and resources available to support the change. In the context of the SEAM trial, reasons triggering the change included the attachment of schooling requirements to income support payments, and resources to support the change included the provision of DHS social work contact to assist SEAM parents overcome barriers to school enrolment and attendance.

The Theory of Change approach is also helpful in understanding and conceptualising reactions and responses leading to behavioural change. For the purpose of this evaluation, this is used to provide focus and to facilitate the structure of the 'narrative' about the effectiveness of the trial.

The determination of the key elements for the SEAM trial was informed by identifying existing knowledge around conditional welfare and behavioural change. It also draws upon information on existing programmes of a similar nature in both Australia and overseas from grey<sup>23</sup> and academic literature. These include Australian Government research on policy initiated change,<sup>24</sup> extensive research evidence<sup>25</sup> and systematic reviews.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to understand that the SEAM trial was implemented within a complex social environment and SEAM was only one of a suite of measures/initiatives to address the issue. The Theory of Change for the SEAM trial is not intended to identify all the underlying attributes and/or differentiate the potential effects among all other similar measures implemented over the same period. As a theoretical framework, it intends to guide the

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<sup>22</sup> The notion of theory-guided program evaluation was first introduced by Carol Weiss in 1972 (Weiss 1972). The Theory of Change approach has since been developed and adopted in evaluation practice. In short, it is a framework to describe how and why an initiative works in theory.

<sup>23</sup> Grey literature refers to reports produced by government and non-government sectors.

<sup>24</sup> Australian Public Service Commission (2007), "Changing Behaviour: a Public Policy Perspective".

<sup>25</sup> For example, DEEWR (2008), 'National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training'; the AIHW Welfare Closing the Gap Clearing House (2010), 'School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students'.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Penman, R. (2006), 'Welfare Payments and Behavioural Change: A review of the literature'; Griggs, J. and Evans, M. (2010), 'Sanctions Within Conditional Benefit Systems: A review of evidence'.

evaluation through the identification of key elements of the SEAM trial, which may affect the effectiveness of the trial.

### **3.2. Key elements of the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial**

As depicted in Figure 3.2.1, the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial had a focus on the process that was expected to influence behavioural changes in relation to school enrolment and attendance. There are three broad categories - 'reasons for change', 'resources for change' and 'pathways to influencing behavioural change' - used to describe the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial.

#### **Reasons for change**

School enrolment and attendance, as the basic requirements for education engagement, is essential for achieving desirable education outcomes in the long term. The literature suggests that there is a combination of associated factors (personal, family, school, community and society, and demographic) which affect a student's education engagement. Among all these factors, parental effort is identified as the most prominent in encouraging and supporting education. The empirical evidence, therefore, supports the intent of SEAM which was to encourage parents taking responsibility for school enrolment and attendance of their school-age child. The corresponding schooling requirements attached to income support entitlements were, therefore, expected to act as an effective motivator to encourage behavioural change in relation to school enrolment and attendance.

#### **Resources for change**

As the first step towards influencing behavioural change, resources are required to ensure awareness and understanding of the measure among relevant stakeholders through effective consultation and communication. To implement a policy measure aimed at addressing enrolment and attendance issues, the availability of real time enrolment and attendance data is essential, as the real time information is needed for the issue to be appropriately identified and for the action to be taken promptly. In theory, resources were required in the context of SEAM to build the IT infrastructure that supported data transfer, data linkage and data exchange across agencies in a real time manner. A review of literature on conditional welfare and behavioural change also suggests that the provision of support services is crucial for the success of a deterrent strategy like SEAM. This is reflected in the provision of support services through the DHS social work contact as one of the features which were offered to families being referred under SEAM.

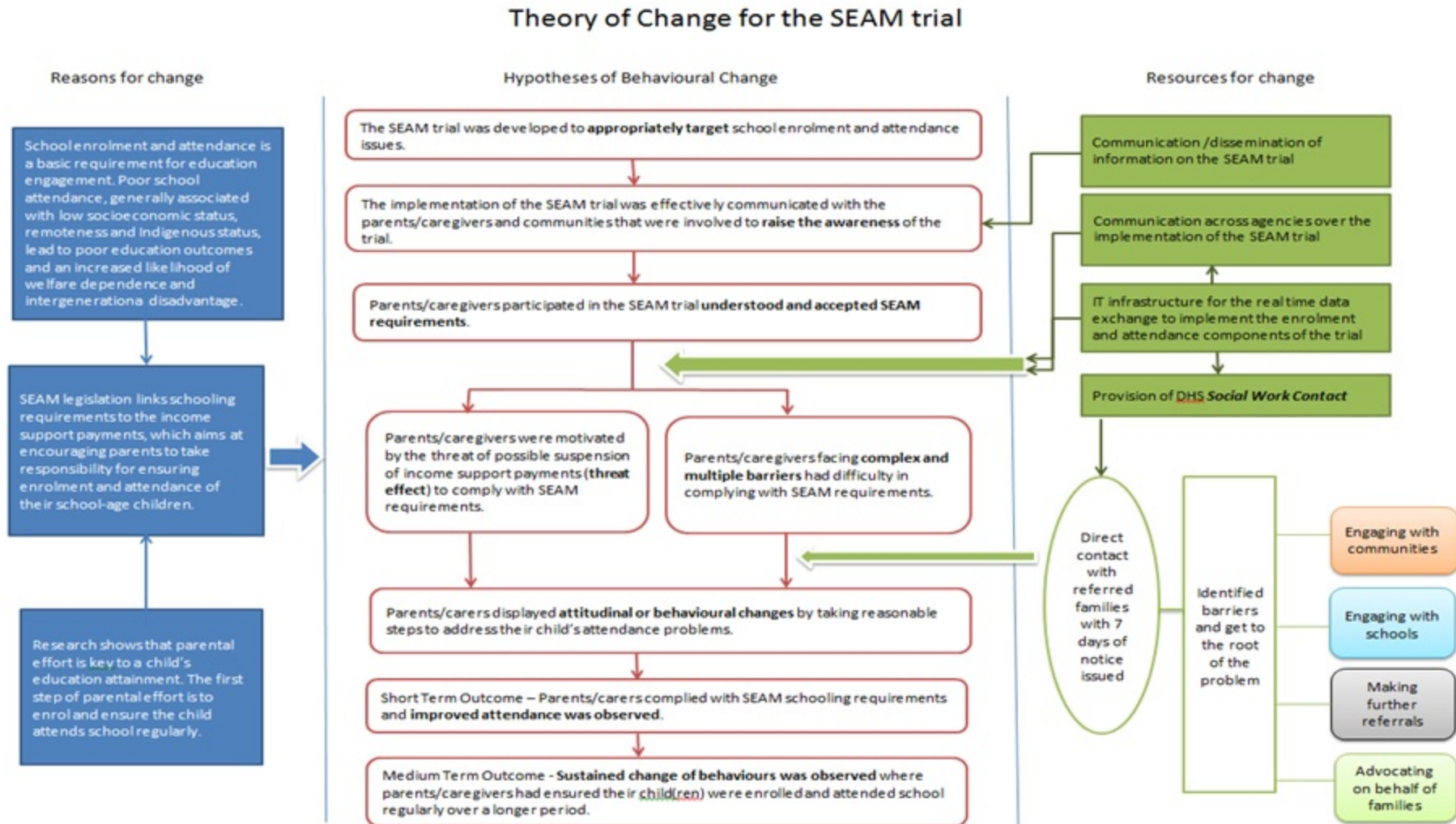
#### **Pathways to influencing behavioural change**

The theory of behaviour change – the 'Stage of Change Model' developed by Prochaska and Di Clemente (1986) - suggests that the change of behaviour generally occurs in stages over time and the movement through these stages is rather cyclical. That is, it is possible to observe relapse over the process of behavioural change. For the SEAM trial, it was envisaged that the change of behaviour would be motivated by the threat of possible suspension of income support payments rather than the actual suspension. But families faced complex barriers to make the change, which needed to be identified and addressed through support services. Otherwise, sustained behavioural change was unlikely to take place.



A detailed description of each of the key elements identified in the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial is presented at [Appendix 9](#).

Figure 3.2.1: Theory of Change for the SEAM trial



## **4. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGY**

### **4.1. Evaluation scope**

The final evaluation of the SEAM trial covered the entire trial period from January 2009 to July 2012 in the NT and from October 2009 to July 2012 in QLD. The evaluation did not cover the period related to the expansion of SEAM as part of the Northern Territory Stronger Futures package.

The final evaluation focused on measuring additionality, which involved identifying the impact of the SEAM trial against a counterfactual. This involved measuring the school attendance outcomes of a SEAM child, compared to what would have happened in the absence of the SEAM trial.

The disaggregation and reporting of monitoring data in relation to the SEAM trial was not in scope for the final evaluation, as this was regularly collected and reported by the SEAM programme area. This means that the final evaluation is not the primary source for enrolment and attendance compliance statistics, including the number of in-scope parents and children, the number of parents who were issued an enrolment or attendance notice, and the number of enrolment/attendance income support suspensions and cancellations.

It was also beyond the scope of this final evaluation to focus on the moral philosophy and ethical debate related to a deterrent measure like SEAM.

### **4.2. Evaluation questions for the SEAM trial**

The evaluation questions have been developed, taking into consideration the objectives of the trial, policy evidence-based needs and available data, to examine:

- EQ.1 How effective was SEAM implementation in raising awareness of the SEAM trial among stakeholder groups in the NT and QLD?
- EQ.2 Did parents, educators and people in the NT and QLD communities have a sound understanding of SEAM requirements?
- EQ.3 To what extent did the enrolment component of the SEAM trial have an impact on school enrolment of SEAM children, and in particular, how did the introduction of a second enrolment information exchange process mid-way through the year in QLD in 2011 affect the enrolment outcomes of SEAM children with high mobility?
- EQ.4 How did the process changes implemented over the trial period impact on the effectiveness of the attendance component of the SEAM trial?
- EQ.5 To what extent did the attendance component of the SEAM trial have an impact on school attendance of SEAM students by addressing unauthorised absences, and in particular, how did the provision of social worker contact along with issuing attendance notices affect the attendance outcomes of SEAM children?
- EQ.6 Were there any differences in impact from the SEAM trial which can be attributed to family characteristics?

- EQ.7 What reasonable steps did SEAM parents take in complying with attendance requirements?
- EQ.8 Is the SEAM trial likely to lead to sustained behavioural change, measured by the pattern of reoccurrence of receiving attendance notices or having income support payments being suspended among SEAM parents over the trial period?

### **4.3. Evaluation approach**

The final evaluation of the SEAM trial covered the entire trial period and made use of a range of data sources, including findings from existing research, to address the evaluation questions outlined in Section 4.2.

#### **Literature review**

An in-house literature review was conducted to identify existing knowledge around conditional welfare for the purpose of improving school attendance and educational outcomes. The literature review drew together information on existing programmes, approaches and results in both Australia and overseas contexts, to develop the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial. As previously discussed, the Theory of Change attempts to identify reasons for change, resources needed for successful implementation and pathways to influencing behavioural change under SEAM.

#### **Synthesis of existing findings**

The evaluation also incorporated analysis and findings from all evaluations previously done for the trial (refer to [Appendix 10](#) for details) on:

- the nature and extent of the problem with school enrolment and attendance in the trial sites and SEAM schools
- the effectiveness of the implementation of the trial
- factors affecting the effectiveness of the enrolment and attendance components of the trial.

#### **Impact evaluation**

The impact evaluation is a result-based evaluation approach, and is central to the final evaluation of the SEAM trial. A quasi-experimental approach using difference-in-differences estimation was used in the impact evaluation for the SEAM trial. This was achieved by differencing the average changes observed for those participating in the SEAM trial (*treatment group*) from the average changes observed for those not participating in the SEAM trial (*comparison group*) during the periods *before* and *after* the SEAM trial was implemented.

The comparison group included students who were enrolled in non-SEAM schools or were not living in trial sites, and whose parents were receiving income support payments. These students were identified from selected comparison schools which were similar to SEAM schools, in relation to a range of factors such as school ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) score, total enrolment, attendance rate, year range, Indigenous status and remoteness.

A summary of statistics on the selection of comparison schools is presented at [Appendix 11](#), and maps of locations of SEAM and comparison schools are presented at [Appendix 12, 13 and 14](#). A detailed description of the impact evaluation methodology is presented at [Appendix 15](#).

### **Social Work case studies**

Case studies provide supplementary qualitative information to any findings stemming from quantitative analysis. They help to provide an in-depth understanding of the circumstance surrounding participants involved in the SEAM trial.

The Social Work Information System (SWIS) managed by DHS captures detailed information on types of social work contact and interventions under SEAM to address the barriers affecting school attendance. The case studies included in this report made use of the case information obtained from SWIS to provide contextual information that assisted in explaining barriers experienced by SEAM families and the challenges social workers faced in providing support to these families.

### **Interviews with school principals and education authorities**

Field visits were conducted by the in-house SEAM evaluation team during March and April 2013 to interview school principals from four selected SEAM schools in NT sites and three SEAM schools in the Logan sites.<sup>27</sup> The evaluation team also interviewed staff from NT DET and QLD DETE. These interviews collected qualitative information on the operation of the SEAM trial from the perspective of schools and education authorities, which was used to contextualise the findings from the quantitative analysis. In particular, interviews focused on barriers to attendance, the attendance referral process, interactions between schools and DHS social workers, and effects of the SEAM trial.

## **4.4. Data sources**

Provision of fit for purpose data was critical to the successful conduct of the final evaluation of the SEAM trial. For the purpose of undertaking an impact evaluation, an essential data requirement was to obtain school enrolment and attendance data for students enrolled in SEAM schools and selected non-SEAM schools (comparison schools) from education authorities for the period before and after the SEAM trial was implemented (i.e. 2008-2012).<sup>28</sup> The 2008 data from the NT and the 2008 to October 2009 data from QLD was used as baseline data.

In addition to the school enrolment and attendance data from education authorities, a range of data sources was utilised for the final evaluation to address evaluation questions, including:

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<sup>27</sup> An interview with a school in the very remote community in QLD was originally scheduled but was declined by the school.

<sup>28</sup> Attendance data from Tiwi College was not available, as it is understood that the College was under considerable resource constraint and had difficulty in providing the required data.

- DHS administrative data extracted monthly from the Research and Evaluation Dataset (RED) maintained by the Department of Employment
- commissioned and in-house qualitative survey data collected over the trial period, including qualitative fieldwork conducted by URBIS in 2009, telephone interviews by SRC in 2010, process review by the in-house SEAM evaluation team in 2011 (2011 SEAM process review) and field visits in 2013<sup>29</sup> (2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork)
- programme administrative data provided by DHS in the form of monitoring data on a weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis.

A detailed description of data sources for the final evaluation of the SEAM trial is presented at [Appendix 16](#).

#### **4.5. Governance arrangements**

The SEAM Evaluation Steering Committee was established in August 2011 to better communicate and interact with all key stakeholders on evaluation related issues.

The current key stakeholders include:

- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- Australian Department of Employment
- Australian Department of Social Services
- Australian Department of Human Services (DHS)
- Northern Territory Department of Education
- Northern Territory Catholic Education Office (NT CEO)
- Northern Territory Tiwi Education Board
- Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (QLD DETE).

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<sup>29</sup> The field visits were undertaken by the SEAM evaluation team in March/April 2013 and covered both the NT sites and QLD Logan sites.

## PART TWO: IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT EVALUATION OF THE SEAM TRIAL

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### 5. PROFILING SEAM TRIAL PARTICIPANTS

#### 5.1. Characteristics of parents subject to SEAM

As described, the SEAM trial criteria determined firstly, if a parent/caregiver was subject to the enrolment component of SEAM in respect of the child(ren). For parents who were in scope for the enrolment component whose child(ren) were enrolled at a SEAM participating school, they were also subject to the attendance component of SEAM in respect of the child(ren). This section summarises demographic characteristics of parents who were ever involved in the SEAM trial, as presented in Table 5.1.1.

It is apparent that, in both the NT and QLD trial sites, female parents/primary caregivers were over represented, accounting for 90 per cent of parents/primary caregivers involved in the trial. Seventy per cent of SEAM parents were aged between 25 and 45. Only around one third of SEAM parents were from a persistently jobless family, and one third moved at least once to a different suburb during the trial period. For the number of associated children in care, around half of SEAM parents in both the NT and QLD had two or three children in their care, while a considerable number of SEAM parents (over 17 per cent) had four or more children in their care.

SEAM parents in the NT and QLD presented some distinguishing demographic differences. There were more non-partnered SEAM parents in QLD than in the NT (68 per cent versus 51 per cent), and more SEAM parents in receipt of the Parenting Payment Single (PPS) in QLD (45 per cent) compared to that in the NT (29 per cent). This variation was accounted for by more SEAM parents in receipt of several major income support payments in the NT such as Parenting Payment Partnered (PPP), Newstart Allowance (NSA) and Disability Support Pension (DSP). These payments accounted for 64 per cent of all payments in the NT, compared to 45 per cent in QLD. Nearly 90 per cent of SEAM parents in the NT were identified with Indigenous status and all of them resided in a remote or very remote community. By comparison, fewer than 20 per cent of SEAM parents in QLD were identified with Indigenous status, and nearly 90 per cent of them lived in a suburban community.

Related to the observed demographic differences, there was substantially higher mobility (measured by families moving out of the suburb where they lived two or more times) among SEAM families in the NT (18 per cent) than in QLD (7 per cent) during the trial. It is also reported almost all SEAM parents in the NT were born in an English-speaking country (mainly Australia), however, English may not be their primary language given their Indigenous status. In QLD, over 20 per cent of SEAM parents were born in a non-English speaking country, predominantly the Pacific Islands.

SEAM parents who were involved in both enrolment and attendance components generally showed similar demographic characteristics to SEAM parents who were only involved in the enrolment component.

**Table 5.1.1: Characteristics of parents ever involved in the SEAM trial**

	Enrolment component		Attendance component	
	NT	QLD	NT	QLD
<b>Gender</b>				
male	9.7%	11.1%	7.7%	10.1%
female	90.3%	88.9%	92.3%	89.9%
<b>Marital Status</b>				
partnered	48.8%	31.6%	48.7%	34.2%
non-partnered	51.2%	68.4%	51.3%	65.8%
<b>Age Group</b>				
under 25	12.5%	4.8%	12.4%	4.9%
25 - 34	40.2%	40.2%	41.2%	41.3%
35 - 44	28.3%	35.0%	28.7%	33.8%
45 and over	18.9%	20.0%	17.8%	19.9%
<b>Indigenous Status</b>				
Indigenous	88.7%	17.8%	89.3%	20.2%
non-Indigenous	11.3%	82.2%	10.7%	79.8%
<b>Country of birth</b>				
Born in an English speaking country	99.3%	77.1%	99.3%	77.0%
Born in a non-English speaking country	0.7%	22.9%	0.7%	23.0%
<b>Number of children in care</b>				
1 child	32.5%	32.7%	28.8%	28.5%
2 children	29.5%	29.4%	30.0%	29.2%
3 children	20.1%	20.8%	21.5%	22.3%
4 or more children	17.9%	17.1%	19.6%	20.0%
<b>Type of income support payment received</b>				
PPS (Parenting Payment, Partnered)	29.5%	45.6%	30.6%	45.6%
PPP (Parenting Payment, Single)	28.0%	16.1%	30.7%	18.1%
NSA (New Start Allowance)	23.5%	19.2%	20.5%	17.1%
DSP (Disability Support Pension)	12.9%	10.0%	12.1%	10.2%
Other payments	6.1%	9.1%	6.1%	9.0%
<b>Persistently jobless family flag</b>				
from a persistently jobless family	38.2%	32.8%	40.8%	36.4%
not from a persistently jobless family	61.8%	67.2%	59.2%	63.6%
<b>Remoteness</b>				
suburban community	0.0%	89.1%	0.0%	86.7%
remote/very remote community	100.0%	10.9%	100.0%	13.3%
<b>Mobility during the trial</b>				
no move	62.9%	65.9%	66.6%	70.6%



one move	18.6%	26.5%	12.4%	20.7%
two or more moves	18.5%	7.6%	21.0%	8.8%

Note that not all columns for each category sum to 100 per cent due to rounding issues.

## 5.2. Summary of key SEAM trial activities

### 5.2.1. Enrolment component

During the trial period, there were a total of 6266 parents (1473 in the NT and 4793 in QLD) ever involved in the enrolment component of the SEAM trial. Parents in scope for SEAM were sent enrolment notification letters where enrolment information for their school-aged child was not available. Failure to provide enrolment details within the 14-day compliance period resulted in the suspension of SEAM parents' income support payments, if no reasonable excuse or special circumstance exemption was applied.

As shown in Table 5.2.1, for parents who received the enrolment notification letter over the trial, 87 per cent of SEAM parents in the NT and 89 per cent in QLD provided enrolment details of their school-age child, with the remaining parents (13 per cent in the NT and 11 per cent in QLD) moving out of scope during the compliance period. There was no cancellation of income support payments under the SEAM enrolment component. This meant that after excluding those who moved out of scope over time, the overall enrolment compliance (measured by the compliance at various stages of the enrolment process including sanctions) reached 100 per cent.

**Table 5.2.1: Summary of compliance with SEAM enrolment notices, as at 29 June 2012**

SEAM status	NT	QLD
Ever 'in-scope' for SEAM enrolment component (since SEAM trial began)	1473 parents (involving 2955 children)	4793 parents (involving 8740 children)
<u>Average enrolment compliance rate<sup>a</sup></u>	<u>87%</u>	<u>89%</u>
<i>After receiving the enrolment notification letter, before being contacted</i>	60%	83%
<i>After follow up contact, before sanction</i>	27%	12%
<i>After sanction</i>	13%	5%
Moved out of scope <sup>b</sup>	13%	11%
Enrolment income support payment suspensions (since SEAM trial began)	161 parents (involving 231 children)	180 parents (involving 255 children)
Enrolment income support payment cancellations	0	0

Notes:

- The average enrolment compliance rate only applies to parents who were sent an enrolment notification letter. It was calculated by averaging the percentage of in-scope parents being sent a notification letter who had provided enrolment details, over 2010 to 2011. 2009 data was excluded due to a different enrolment process in the NT and 2012 data was excluded due to the trial being ceased in the mid-year.
- This captures the averaging percentage of in-scope parents being sent a notification letter who moved out of scope after receiving the notification letter or after being sanctioned over 2010 to 2011.

The enrolment compliance appeared to occur at different stages of the process. In-scope parents in QLD were more likely to provide enrolment details after receiving the notification letter, but before being contacted, compared with those in the NT (83 per cent versus 60 per cent). Feedback from DHS social workers in the 2011 SEAM process review suggested that the higher rate of in-scope parents who only provided enrolment details after being contacted or sanctioned in the NT may be related to the remote location of the trial sites where parents may have limited literacy ability which limited their capacity to understand and comply with the requirement.

For parents who received the SEAM notification letter, only 13 per cent of NT parents and five per cent of QLD parents had their income support payments suspended. Over the trial period, a total of 161 parents in the NT and 180 parents in QLD had their income support payments suspended under the SEAM enrolment component. But there was no cancellation of income support payments under the SEAM enrolment component in both the NT and QLD. This meant that suspended SEAM parents had either provided enrolment details of in-scope child(ren), or moved out of scope during the compliance period, so no further actions were imposed upon them.

Flowcharts detailing the progression of parents and children through the enrolment stages of the SEAM enrolment component over the trial period are presented at [Appendix 17](#) for NT sites and [Appendix 18](#) for QLD sites.

#### 5.2.2. Attendance component

Parents in scope for the SEAM enrolment component were also in scope for the attendance component if their school-age child attended a school participating in the SEAM trial. Over the trial period, a total of 4388 parents (1303 in the NT and 3085 in QLD) were ever involved in the attendance component of the SEAM trial. Most SEAM parents in the NT (over 88 per cent) were subject to both the enrolment and attendance components, while just 64 per cent of SEAM parents in QLD were subject to both components. This is largely because in the suburban Logan area, only a selected number of schools were involved in the trial. This meant that in QLD it was more likely for school-age children to reside in the trial sites but attend a school not participating in SEAM over the trial period.

As shown in Table 5.2.2, among parents who were subject to the attendance component, a higher proportion of NT parents were issued with an attendance notice than QLD parents (395 parents in the NT and 127 parents in QLD). This was due to the automatic referral process implemented in the NT which resulted in more students being referred, whereas the referral was at the discretion of school principals in QLD. For the same reason, there were substantially more SEAM parents in the NT than in QLD whose income support payments were suspended under the SEAM attendance component. There were two parents in the NT whose income support payments were cancelled during the trial period, whereas no payment cancellation occurred in QLD.

As at 29 June 2012 (the end of the trial), 67 per cent of NT SEAM parents who were issued with an attendance notice were compliant, compared to 51 per cent of SEAM parents in QLD. The disparity may be attributed to more QLD SEAM parents being granted reasonable excuses or special circumstance exemptions, or having moved out of scope during the compliance period. There were also a small number of QLD SEAM parents still within the compliance period or awaiting determination when the trial was ceased at the end of June 2012. For those being issued with an attendance notice, more NT SEAM parents than QLD SEAM parents were contacted by DHS social workers (68 per cent compared to 42 per cent).

Flowcharts summarising activities under the SEAM attendance component as at 29 June 2012 are presented at [Appendix 19](#) for NT sites and [Appendix 20](#) for QLD sites.

**Table 5.2.2: Summary of SEAM attendance component as at 29 June 2012**

SEAM Status	NT	QLD
Ever 'in-scope' for SEAM attendance component (since SEAM trial began)	1303 parents (involving 2497 children)	3085 parents (involving 5439 children)
Ever being issued an attendance notice <i>Status (as at 29 June 2012)</i>	395 parents (involving 617 children)	127 parents (involving 175 children)
<i>Compliant<sup>c</sup></i>	67%	51%
<i>Reasonable excuse or special circumstances</i>	4%	9%
<i>Out of scope</i>	29%	35%
<i>Others<sup>d</sup></i>	-	5%
Ever having been contacted by DHS social workers	269 parents (involving 398 children)	54 parents (involving 57 children)
Attendance income support payment suspensions (since SEAM trial began)	119 parents (involving 162 children)	3 parents (involving 6 children)
Attendance income support payment cancellations	2 parents	0

Notes:

- c. The compliance was reflected by an improved attendance or parent(s) taking reasonable steps or other reasons.
- d. Others may include a small number of cases within the compliance period, or beyond the compliance period awaiting determination.

### 5.2.3. Duration of participation in SEAM

For various reasons, students entered into and exited from SEAM at any point in the trial period. As shown in Table 5.2.3, the main reasons for entering into SEAM were students qualified for SEAM at the start of the trial, families moving into the trial site, the parent/caregiver starting to claim income support payments subject to schooling requirements, child attaining minimum school age or coming into care by a SEAM

parent/caregiver over the trial period. As shown in Table 5.2.4, the outflow of SEAM students was mainly due to the trial ending, eligible families moving out of the trial site, the parent/caregiver not in receipt of income support payment subject to schooling requirements, or a change in the child care arrangement.

It was found that proportionally more SEAM students in QLD than in the NT entered into the trial at its commencement and exited from the trial at its conclusion. This was because the trial sites in QLD were mostly in suburban areas while the NT trial sites were in either remote or very remote locations. The higher mobility observed among the NT SEAM students was most likely due to more frequent changes in the care arrangement for school-age children.

**Table 5.2.3: Entry reasons for SEAM students**

Entry reasons	NT	QLD
start of the trial	27.60%	37.92%
adult claimed benefits	15.36%	16.72%
child attained minimum school age	11.72%	12.91%
child came into care	18.96%	6.73%
child went off benefits	0.13%	0.03%
family moved into the trial site	26.23%	25.69%

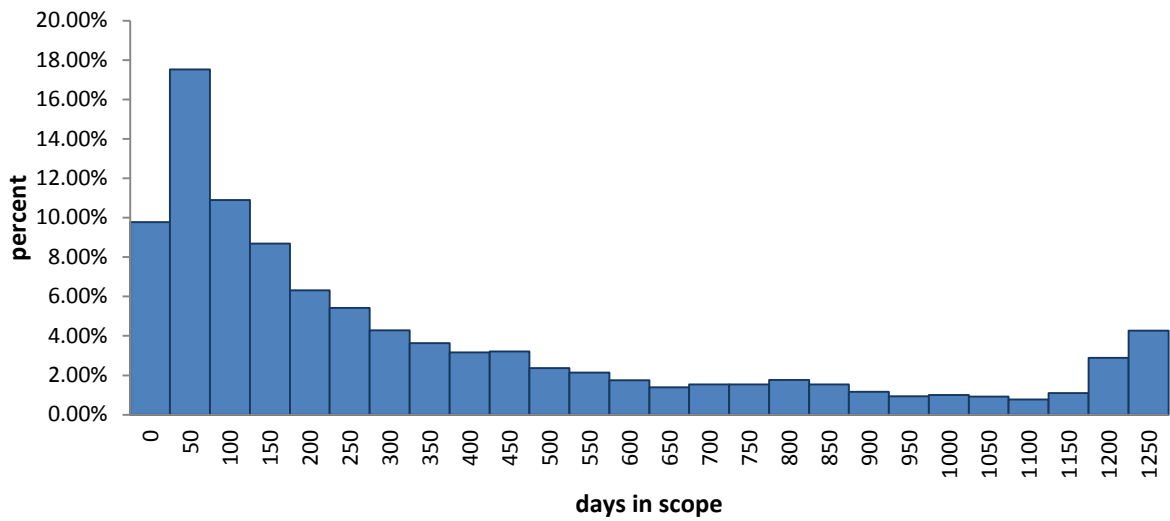
**Table 5.2.4: Exit reasons for SEAM students**

Exit Reasons	NT	QLD
end of the trial	28.67%	39.30%
adult ceased payments	17.57%	18.6%
adult deceased	0.02%	0.19%
child attained school leaving age	2.46%	9.68%
child claimed benefits	0.92%	0.37%
child left care	24.78%	8.28%
family moved out of the trial site	25.59%	23.62%

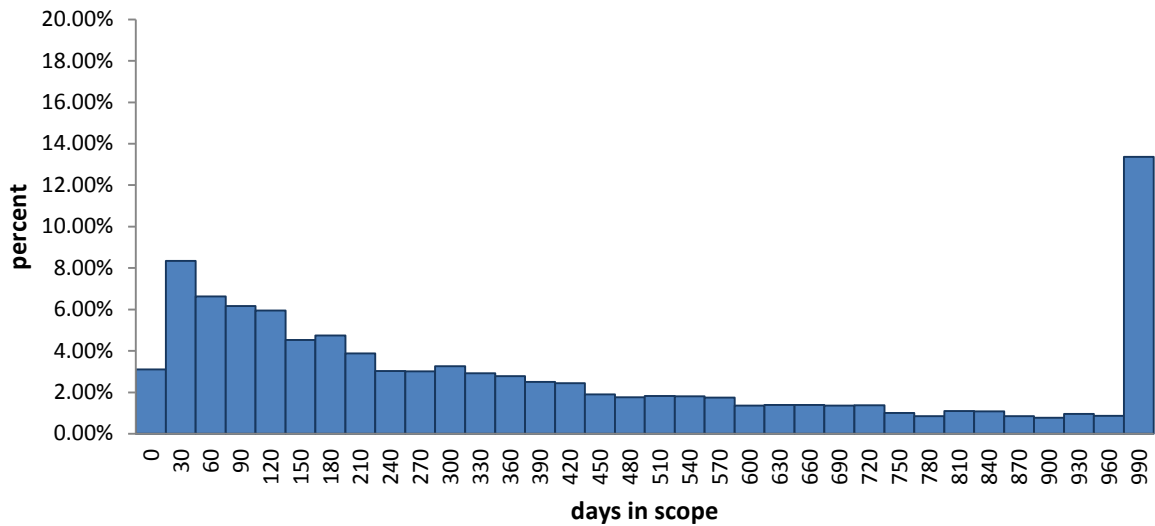
As shown in Figure 5.2.1 and Figure 5.2.2, SEAM students in NT sites are highly mobile as one third of students were in scope for less than 100 days in the trial and less than 5 per cent were in scope for the entire trial period. In contrast, SEAM students in QLD sites were generally in scope for SEAM for a longer period, and over 13 per cent were in scope for the entire trial.

The variation in the distribution of in scope days of SEAM students may be related to different entry and exit reasons in NT and QLD sites, as described earlier.

**Figure 5.2.1: Distribution of in scope days of SEAM students in the NT**



**Figure 5.2.2: Distribution of in scope days of SEAM students in QLD**



## 6. COMMUNICATION AT SEAM IMPLEMENTATION

### Evaluation Questions and Key Findings:

#### *EQ.1 How effective was SEAM implementation in raising awareness of the SEAM trial among stakeholder groups in the NT and QLD?*

Communication strategies were put in place when the SEAM trial was introduced in the NT and QLD, including disseminating fact sheets, mailing out information to parents, holding community meetings, broadcasting on local radio programmes and advertising in school newsletters. But different strategies implemented in the NT and QLD resulted in a different level of awareness about SEAM.

The different level of awareness of the SEAM trial among parents in the NT and QLD is related to how the parent was first notified about SEAM. In the NT, a mail out from DHS to all in-scope parents requesting enrolment details of their school-age child seemed to be more effective in getting the SEAM message across to the wider parent community who were not aware of being in scope of SEAM compared to the approach in QLD which only required enrolment information from parents whose child's enrolment details were not found.

In the NT, there was a relatively high level of general awareness of the SEAM trial across all stakeholder groups, although the degree of awareness of SEAM, in particular schools' role in SEAM, varied among principals. That may be related to the situation that the time taken to refine SEAM prior to implementation had led to minimal time available to communicate consistent information on SEAM to schools.

In QLD, the level of awareness of the SEAM trial among in-scope parents was relatively low, but school principals in QLD generally recounted that the initial communication on SEAM with schools was informative and provided the necessary amount of information.

In addition, schools also played an important role in disseminating SEAM messages, in particular, to parents. SEAM schools in QLD Logan sites appeared well informed with training sessions held and well-prepared information materials on the SEAM trial, provided by DHS and QLD DETE. Therefore, these schools were found to be adequately equipped to use a range of SEAM information materials to raise awareness of SEAM among parents in QLD Logan sites.

As previously reported in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, the importance of effective communication about SEAM implementation was confirmed through feedback from fieldwork undertaken for the evaluation. The feedback showed that, for those who were aware of SEAM in Logan sites, almost half reported that the implementation of the trial had made them think about the importance of their child's schooling, and some also noted the trial had encouraged them to make more effort to address their school-age child's attendance issues.

NT and QLD school principals and staff interviewed in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork also reported that it was initially evident that families with chronic attendance problems responded to the SEAM message by making more efforts to send their children to school.

*EQ.2 Did parents, educators and people in the NT and QLD communities have a sound understanding of SEAM requirements?*

In addition to the level of awareness about the SEAM trial varying in the NT and QLD and among different stakeholder groups, parents and communities generally had limited understanding of the details of SEAM, and in some cases, were confused about the aims of SEAM and their role in SEAM. It was also reported in NT sites that there was a high level of incorrect information circulating about SEAM and its implementation, which resulted in confusion. For example, people perceived SEAM as nothing more than a 'big-stick' approach to dealing with attendance issues, and SEAM was seen by some parents to be directed only at Indigenous children in remote areas.

The limited understanding about SEAM was reflected in the lack of detailed knowledge of the objectives of SEAM and its process. Parents may have confused the SEAM trial with existing programmes and similar types of support available through schools. There was also little understanding among parents that SEAM was to address 'unauthorised absences', and 'reasonable absences' from school were not affected under SEAM. There was confusion on what constituted 'reasonable steps' and the role of DHS social workers, as well as how parents should engage with schools during the SEAM referral process.

Qualitative research showed that many local communities in NT sites were in support of a policy measure like SEAM to address attendance issues, and some community leaders had expressed a reasonable level of understanding of the SEAM trial. But it was also noted in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork that communities were not totally clear about the difference between the SEAM trial and the prosecution process under the NT and QLD legislation, partly because the process under SEAM of extending support to parents was not well understood by communities. Feedback received from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork also indicated that in some remote communities, there was lack of early consultation with local communities which may have impeded the implementation of the trial. In addition, over time, substantial lags in the SEAM process resulted in communities losing faith in the effectiveness of SEAM, despite being initially supportive.

It was also noted by school principals in NT sites that, during the trial period, the lack of transparency in communication had affected the effectiveness of SEAM implementation. In particular, there was lack of information on the SEAM process and outcomes that eventuated, i.e. schools were not informed of the progress related to SEAM referrals (especially when attendance notices were issued or suspensions of income support payments occurred). This situation arose since DHS was generally required to communicate SEAM related issues through the central education authority<sup>30</sup> in NT sites. As a result, it was not possible for DHS to directly communicate with schools.

Principals and staff interviewed in QLD schools reported that they were not usually consulted on SEAM related decisions such as issuing a notice or payment suspension. This, in some cases, resulted in inconsistency between schools' approach and SEAM actions in

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<sup>30</sup> This rule was applied to government schools participating in SEAM during the trial period.

dealing with attendance issues. Privacy constraints limited the amount of customer information DHS could share.

### **6.1. What was the level of awareness of the SEAM trial among stakeholder groups?**

As noted in the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial (Section 3), raising awareness of a new intervention is the first step in encouraging behaviour change among the target group.

Qualitative research was conducted in April and May 2009 by URBIS to seek feedback from stakeholder groups in the NT about their awareness of the SEAM trial and what they understood about the trial. The qualitative information was collected through face-to-face interviews with individuals, organisational and community stakeholders.

A similar study was undertaken in July 2010 by the Social Research Centre (SRC) to interview stakeholder groups in QLD about their awareness and understanding of SEAM. The qualitative study included data collection from telephone interviews with in-scope parents living in Logan sites, in-depth interviews with parents, school staff and education authorities, and focus groups with the DHS officers, QLD DETE representatives and other community workers.

Key findings from the two studies were reported in the 2009 and 2010 SEAM evaluation reports respectively. The following results have been drawn from these findings and additional recent qualitative work.

#### **Northern Territory**

Overall, it was reported in the URBIS study that there was a high level of general awareness of the SEAM trial across all stakeholder groups in the NT. All stakeholder groups were aware of the link between children's schooling and DHS income support payments to parents. The high level of awareness was achieved through the implementation of a 'Joint Communication Strategy' at the beginning of the trial, which included dissemination of fact sheets, mail out to in scope parents of a SEAM flyer, holding community meetings, and messages through Indigenous radio programmes.

Staff from NT DET and NT CEO were the most familiar with the trial and had a reasonably consistent understanding of the measure and how it applied to both enrolment and attendance. In some sites such as Katherine, NT DET staff were involved in consultation on SEAM implementation so they were likely to have access to detailed information about SEAM.

For parents subject to SEAM, they were all issued with an enrolment notification letter in a mail out by DHS. The notification letter requested details of their child's enrolment at school, along with information introducing the SEAM trial. In this way, the same SEAM message was conveyed to all of the in scope parents at the same time, which, it was thought, helped to raise awareness of the trial among parents.

Awareness of SEAM, however, in particular their role in SEAM, was more varied among school principals, as reported in the 2009 SEAM Evaluation Report. About half of the school principals interviewed reported a reasonable level of understanding of their involvement in



the attendance component. But the other half reported not knowing the details of the attendance component and their involvement. This was most likely a consequence of continuing development and refinement of the SEAM attendance process into the implementation phase, which restricted the information available to principals early in the trial. An exception to this situation was in Katherine Township, as NT DET in Katherine participated in developing SEAM attendance processes and documentation. Consequently, some of the principals of government schools interviewed in the Katherine area were well informed about their role in the attendance component of SEAM.

## **Queensland**

In QLD, the level of awareness of the SEAM trial among parents was relatively low, according to the SRC study and the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report. Forty per cent of parents surveyed recounted that they had not heard about SEAM prior to the interview. Some parents indicated that the first time they were made aware of SEAM was upon being contacted for participation in the survey. Some parents also recounted that they first become aware of SEAM through advertising in DHS offices 10 months after the initial information had been disseminated.

The limited understanding of SEAM among parents in QLD was likely related to the enrolment information exchange process implemented under the enrolment component when the SEAM trial was first introduced. Different to the mail out process initially implemented in the NT which was used to notify all in-scope parents, the QLD enrolment information exchange process only notified in-scope parents for whom the enrolment details of their school-age child was not found through linking the enrolment data and SEAM customer data. Therefore, parents not being contacted would not have been directly informed of the trial, or would have only become aware of the trial through indirect avenues, such as through the media, other parents, or school personnel. Of those parents who were aware of SEAM prior to interview, 60 per cent recounted that they were informed about SEAM through the media. Parents also recounted that they were informed about SEAM by other parents (21 per cent) or through school personnel (10 per cent). Other avenues by which parents became aware of SEAM included DHS staff, posters at DHS offices or letters from their child's school.

Qualitative information from the SRC study indicated that initial communication on SEAM with schools was generally found to be informative and provided the necessary amount of information. A range of information materials provided by DHS or by QLD DET were used by schools for distribution in the Logan sites before the implementation of the trial. At some schools, the SEAM message was advertised in the school newsletter, or SEAM flyers or brochures were sent to all parents. This approach may have raised awareness of SEAM among some parents, but parents were not likely to be aware whether they were in scope for SEAM, or not, by reading the information.

The approach adopted by school principals in disseminating and managing information and facilitating the implementation of the trial among staff varied. One school recruited all staff to be involved in implementing the measure as it was considered the joint responsibility of all staff in the school for achieving attendance goals. Other schools educated all staff on the

trial but did not expect teachers to be actively involved in the process with the trial managed by school administrators.

In the SRC study, community workers reported a range of different ways in which they were first informed about SEAM, from contact by media to official contact from DHS. A general feeling expressed by community workers was that they would have liked involvement in the consultation and decision-making process prior to the implementation of the trial to discuss how services could be used to support members of the community affected by SEAM.

## **6.2. Did relevant stakeholders, in particular, parents have a sound understanding of SEAM trial requirements?**

Although the level of awareness about the SEAM trial varied in the NT and QLD and among different stakeholder groups, parents and communities had limited understanding of the details of SEAM, and in some cases, were confused about the aims of SEAM and the roles of some stakeholders.

### **Northern Territory**

As noted in Section 6.1, the URBIS study showed that stakeholders in NT sites, including parents and community members, were generally aware of a new link between schooling and a parent's DHS income support payment. The URBIS study, however, also reported that there was limited knowledge of the details, and the understanding that was reported by these stakeholders often included inaccurate information.

Interviewed parents generally recalled DHS requiring enrolment details for their children. But very few parents understood that the request for enrolment details was directly associated with SEAM, and most did not recall the letter as the prompt for providing DHS with the requested details. The recollection of receiving a letter from DHS requesting enrolment details also varied from location to location.

There was also little understanding amongst parents that SEAM was to address 'unauthorised absences', and 'reasonable absences' from school were not affected under SEAM. Examples of this included concerns of some parents that a sick child should be sent to school in case the parent is 'reported', and other parents were concerned about tensions arising between meeting their cultural obligations and complying with school attendance requirements.

School principals usually received information about SEAM from the correspondence with education authorities or from the community meetings. NT DET schools, in particular schools in Katherine, were better informed about SEAM than NT CEO schools since the NT CEO was not involved in the development of the SEAM attendance process. It was reported that minimal information was circulated to NT CEO schools before the start of SEAM activities. In general, school principals interviewed indicated that they were 'time poor' and received a great deal of correspondence every school day. As a result, SEAM information may have been overlooked or ignored if the timeframe of the measure and their role had not been clearly specified.

Qualitative information from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork showed that many local communities in NT sites were in support of a policy measure which was more punitive in

nature to address attendance issues. It was also noted in the URBIS study that community leaders were more likely than parents to express some understanding of SEAM, based on community meetings or individual conversations with school principals and teachers. But they had frequently found that their initial understanding of SEAM was incorrect with more information becoming available. For example, from the early communication about SEAM, community leaders had understood that families with attendance issues, particularly those seen as 'well known' not to send their children to school, would be immediately referred to DHS under SEAM. It was also noted in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork that the community was not totally clear about the difference between the SEAM trial and the prosecution process under the *NT Education Act*. It was partly because the process under SEAM of extending support to parents was not well understood by the community.

Correctly conveying SEAM messages in detail to stakeholder groups proved to be challenging. Feedback received from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork also indicated that in some remote communities, there was a lack of early consultation with the local community. Qualitative information reported in the 2009 SEAM Evaluation Report also showed that there was a high level of incorrect information circulating about SEAM and how it would be implemented. Examples of incorrect information held by parents and community members were that:

- SEAM was solely directed at Indigenous children in remote areas.
- All caregivers (including grandmothers and aunts) would have their payments suspended if they were caring for a child.
- All Indigenous families in trial locations were subject to SEAM, including waged families and families participating in Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).
- Any payment suspensions would immediately follow non-compliance with SEAM, rather than requiring a compliance period.

In addition, over time, substantial lags in the SEAM process resulted in communities losing faith in the effectiveness of SEAM, despite being initially supportive. It was also noted by NT school principals in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork that there was lack of transparency in communication during the trial period. In particular, schools were not informed of the progress related to SEAM referrals, e.g. schools were not aware when attendance notices were issued or suspensions of income support payments occurred. This situation was related to the communication arrangement that DHS was generally required to communicate SEAM related issues through the central education authority<sup>31</sup> in NT sites. As a result, it was not possible for DHS to directly communicate with schools.

## **Queensland**

Qualitative information from the SRC study showed that stakeholders' views on the ownership of SEAM and who had responsibility for implementing the initiative varied. Views expressed by educators differed, particularly on the level of responsibility schools had for driving the initiative. Some principals took strong leadership for driving the initiative within

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<sup>31</sup> This rule was applied to government schools participating in SEAM during the trial period.

their school and the broader community. Other principals took the view that a whole-of-school approach was needed to implement the programme and drive overall improvements in attendance. In these cases, while principals would play a large role in driving improvements, classroom staff and specialist area teachers were also key to the successful implementation of the trial in the school. One principal expressed the view that DHS held ownership of SEAM, despite the fact that the particular school was very active in attendance management.

Views differed as to the types of families who were likely to be referred under the SEAM process, how referral assessments would be made and the complexity of cases referred. Schools were of the view that SEAM would directly target the small number of problem families whose children had chronic or extreme attendance problems. But referrals to SEAM were not implemented uniformly across and within schools as most educators exercised discretion when initiating the SEAM process. DHS staff similarly expressed the view that discretion would be exercised when viewing cases where a reasonable excuse could be identified. DHS could base this decision upon case notes or direct contact with families.

There was confusion about the role of DHS social workers, whose task was to refer SEAM families to further support services in the community. While existing service relationships were identified within communities through initial meetings, community workers were left unsure of their involvement in the trial and what role they should be fulfilling.

The attendance referral process operating in 2010 relied on DHS to apply reasonable excuse and special circumstances to cases in accordance with the legislative Determination and DEEWR policy guidelines. As noted by DHS officers in the 2011 SEAM process review, schools were only notified about reasonable excuse exemptions and given no involvement in decision making. This provided some difficulties for schools, especially where the reasonable excuse was not consistent with their knowledge of the student's situation. In addition, there were cases where a reasonable excuse was granted on the grounds that a school was unable to deliver services it was legally required to. For example, a reasonable excuse exemption was determined on the basis that the school could not provide appropriate access for a child with a disability.

Stakeholder group understanding differed on the type and level of complexity of cases that would be referred to DHS. Schools held the view that a number of families required substantial support which the school was unable to provide. Principals considered that referral under SEAM would trigger intensive social support required by these families. DHS social workers were expected to see a greater number of referrals of cases relating to irregular attendance problems.

Feedback from school principals in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork indicated that there was confusion on what constituted 'reasonable steps' and how parents should engage with schools during the referral process. Stakeholders struggled to define reasonable steps and there were marked differences in interpretation of legislation and how decisions should be implemented. It was reported by school principals and staff in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork that the school was not usually involved in determining SEAM actions such as issuing a notice and payment suspension. It would have been better if the school was

consulted with any SEAM related decisions. This situation was likely related to the privacy constraint that limited the amount of customer information which could be shared by DHS.

The earlier commissioned SRC research showed that parents in QLD were generally unaware or unclear about the aims of SEAM. Parents often confused the trial with existing programmes and similar types of support available through schools. As previously reported in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, however, the implementation of the trial received some positive initial response from parents in QLD who were aware of SEAM, in particular in Logan sites. Of those parents who had heard about the trial prior to interview, about half (49 per cent) reported that the implementation of the trial had made them think about the importance of their child's schooling. A further 29 per cent also noted that the implementation of the trial had encouraged them to make more effort to address their child's attendance issues. This included such actions as discussing the importance of education with their child.

## 7. EFFECTIVENESS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ENROLMENT COMPONENT

### Evaluation Question and Key Findings:

*EQ.3 To what extent did the enrolment component of the SEAM trial have an impact on school enrolment of SEAM children, and in particular, how did the introduction of a second enrolment information exchange process mid-way through the year in QLD in 2011 affect the enrolment outcomes of SEAM children with high mobility?*

The enrolment component of the SEAM trial was designed to assist in reducing the number of students who were not enrolled in an education institution or eligible education alternative. The enrolment component was initially implemented at the beginning of the school term through an exchange of enrolment details of in-scope children, conducted once a year in both the NT and QLD sites. A second information exchange process commenced mid-way through the year from 2011 in QLD sites to capture possible enrolment movements of SEAM students during the school year.

Under SEAM, parents in scope for SEAM were sent enrolment notification letters where enrolment information of their school-aged child was not available. Failure to provide enrolment details within the 14-day compliance period resulted in the suspension of SEAM parents' income support payment, if no reasonable excuse or special circumstance exemption was applied. For cases where parents did not provide enrolment details after their income support payment was suspended, cancellations of their income support payment may occur.

The overall enrolment compliance, in terms of in-scope parents providing enrolment details of their school-age child at various stages of the process, reached 100 per cent for periods over the trial, after excluding those who moved out of scope over time. As a result, there was no cancellation of income support payments under the SEAM enrolment component. This suggests that the SEAM enrolment process was successful in ensuring that children of compulsory school-age in scope for SEAM were enrolled in school or an eligible education alternative, at the point when their enrolment details were verified. Enrolment details could be verified for children who came into scope for SEAM throughout the school year, though as a general rule this did not occur, and SEAM was likely to have helped schools engage with children who might not have been enrolled prior to being in scope for SEAM.

For parents who received the SEAM notification letter, 87 per cent in the NT and 95 per cent in QLD provided the enrolment details of their school-age child without having their income support payment suspended. This suggests that the threat of possible suspension from issuing a notification letter, in most cases, was generally sufficient to ensure the effectiveness of the enrolment component without progressing into a sanction.

But there were issues with how the enrolment component was implemented. The enrolment information exchange under SEAM was a time-consuming manual process linking DHS customers with enrolment details of their child(ren) subject to SEAM. Being conducted at the beginning of the school year, the enrolment information exchange took between

three and four months to be completed. The timeframe for the enrolment verification for SEAM coincided with the School Census, thus the provision of the enrolment information by education authorities could only take place after the School Census. This meant the earliest notification letters requesting enrolment details from parents were issued in May. As a result, the measure ran the risk of any unenrolled students potentially missing nearly half of the school year at the time their enrolments were verified.

Conducting a second enrolment verification mid-way in 2011 in QLD was intended to capture enrolment movements of SEAM students throughout the school year. It was identified, however, that increasing enrolment verifications to twice a year was not necessarily effective in ensuring the full year enrolment of SEAM students with high mobility.

School enrolment is a dynamic process in the sense that families may move house and students may change schools from time to time. There is also qualitative evidence to suggest that some children in the NT may not be identified/captured in income support/schooling records, and are living in what is referred to as the 'Long Grass' for periods of time.

The lack of a national student data tracking system, however, has prevented an understanding of exact numbers of unenrolled students or enrolment movements. For the SEAM enrolment component, given its inefficient manual verification process and point-in-time nature, the introduction of a second enrolment verification every year was still not an adequate solution to tackle the issue of enrolments and any potential enrolment breaks during the school year.

## **7.1. Enrolment verification process**

The enrolment verification was the first stage of the entire SEAM process, and also the first connecting point with parents subject to SEAM. This means that:

- The enrolment verification was the first opportunity to formally notify parents about their involvement in the trial.
- The progress of the enrolment verification also determined the progress of other SEAM activities related to enrolment compliance/sanctions and the attendance component.

As described in Section 2.2.3, the process of enrolment verification under SEAM was changed from gathering enrolment details from each in-scope parent to a enrolment information exchange process requesting enrolment information only from in-scope parents where no enrolment details of their school-age child were found in the database of the state and territory school systems (referred to as 'enrolment information exchange process'). The enrolment information exchange process was initially conducted once a year in the NT and QLD in 2010 but was changed to twice a year in QLD in 2011 but remained once a year in the NT. This section reviews the effectiveness of the enrolment verification process and the changes implemented over the trial period and its impact on intended enrolment outcomes and other SEAM activities.

### **7.1.1. Change from 2009 enrolment verification process to the enrolment information exchange process**

Before the enrolment information exchange process, the 2009 enrolment verification process implemented in the NT started by notifying all in-scope parents about their obligations of enrolling their school-aged child under SEAM, through a bulk mail out. It was assumed that once in-scope parents became aware of schooling requirements under SEAM, they were likely to update their child's enrolment details with DHS. While the bulk mail out was probably more expensive and added additional administrative burden, compared to the enrolment information exchange process that succeeded it, it had the advantage of ensuring that all in-scope parents were informed on SEAM. As described in the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial (Section 3), ensuring programme participants understand the trial is the first stage in influencing behavioural change.

The enrolment information exchange process implemented in 2010 in both the NT and QLD had an advantage of improving the process of checking enrolment information given that most of the enrolment details were found through the enrolment information exchange. Not undertaking the bulk mail out when the trial was first introduced in QLD, however, resulted in missing the opportunity to send a consistent SEAM message to every in-scope parent. As a result, not all in-scope parents in QLD were aware that they were actually in scope of the trial and their obligations under SEAM.

As part of the enrolment information exchange process, a linking process was conducted to link enrolment data from education authorities with DHS customer data. The challenge arising from the linking process is discussed separately in Section 7.1.2 below.



### 7.1.2. Linking process in the enrolment information exchange

The key feature of the enrolment information exchange process commencing in 2010 was to make use of an existing information source to ascertain enrolment details of SEAM children through linking enrolment data from education authorities with DHS customer data. Around 82 per cent of children who were identified by DHS as in scope at the beginning of the enrolment information exchange in 2010 were successfully linked to a current enrolment record. This substantially reduced the number of parents who required an enrolment notification letter, reducing the administrative burden on DHS to manually gather enrolment details from parents.

While the enrolment information exchange process improved the efficiency of getting enrolment details, its effectiveness was constrained by the timeframe for the provision of enrolment records by education authorities and the intensive manual nature of the process managed by DHS. It was originally intended that enrolment verifications be completed in the first four weeks of school. But this was unrealistic for education authorities given the School Census taking place after the first four weeks of school (when enrolments stabilised). The earliest timeframe for the enrolment data exchange could have only been after the School Census date, and in most cases, the data was provided later than that. The data linking undertaken by DHS involved matching enrolment records with DHS customer data. Due to a lack of unique ID for the linkage, the linking process was a complex manual approach which required substantial time, resources and skill.

As a result of these various factors, the enrolment information exchange took between three and four months to be completed, with the earliest letters requesting enrolment details from parents being issued in late May. With this process being completed so late in the school year, the measure ran the risk of any non-enrolled students missing a number of months of school before the enrolment notification letters were sent out.

### 7.1.3. Two rounds of enrolment information exchange

The decision to conduct a second enrolment verification mid-way through the year in QLD in 2011 was taken in response to feedback from the 2011 SEAM process review regarding the transient nature of some families. The rationale was that since families could be transient and move around during the year, the point in time verification at the beginning of the school year was not adequate in capturing this movement.

The enrolment information exchange process identified students who were not enrolled at the start of the year. But students who were verified as enrolled at the start of the year may have become unenrolled over the year for various reasons including expulsion, moving house, and changing care arrangements. There was no mechanism to ensure that all SEAM-eligible children remained enrolled at a school or eligible education alternative through the year. Consequently, it was possible that some children who were in scope for SEAM may have become disengaged from the education system without being identified as unenrolled until the following school year.

Increasing enrolment verifications to twice a year enriched the information base on student enrolments, but it was not the solution to identify the exact number of movements

throughout the year. The process added to administrative burden without substantial benefit, particularly given the resource intensive nature of the enrolment information exchange process described earlier.

This suggests that conducting the process once per year sufficiently served the purpose of communicating on SEAM and re-engaging with unenrolled children that come into scope through the school year. But identifying the exact number of movements throughout the year was beyond the scope of SEAM, and SEAM was not the solution for this purpose. This is also discussed in Section 7.3.

#### 7.1.4. Impact of enrolment verification on the timing of the implementation of the attendance component

Hypothetically, parents should have been able to be sanctioned at the end of the first term or the beginning of the second term under the enrolment component of SEAM. Given the size of the client base and the time taken to complete the enrolment information exchange process discussed above, however, the earliest timeframe for an enrolment notice to be issued was late May or early June. The delay was problematic as the child would have missed almost the whole semester of the school year even though he/she was eventually identified and re-engaged. The lack of timely process also had an impact on the flow of other SEAM activities, causing a delay in the implementation of the attendance component.

## 7.2. Enrolment compliance

### 7.2.1. Length of compliance period

Parents who were sent an enrolment notification letter under SEAM were required to provide enrolment details of in scope child(ren) within 14 days. In normal circumstances, a 14-day compliance period was a sufficient time for a parent to enrol their child in school. But a marked difference was found between families living in suburban and remote communities in relation to the length of compliance, as shown in Table 7.2.1. The median number of days taken to provide enrolment details was in line with the 14-day compliance timeframe for parents living in NT sites and QLD Logan sites. But for parents living in the remote QLD sites of Mornington Island and Doomadgee, the median responding time to an enrolment notification letter doubled to 28 days.

**Table 7.2.1: median number of days taken to provide enrolment details in the absence of identified barriers**

NT sites	
Katherine Township	15 days
Other remote sites	14 days
QLD sites	
Logan area	16 days
Remote sites	28 days

It was noted in the 2011 SEAM process review that in Indigenous remote communities in the NT, the notification letter could take longer than 14 days<sup>32</sup> to reach the family, and comprehension and literacy levels were low among some families. A number of other issues were identified that affected the ability of parents in remote areas to comply with the enrolment component of SEAM. These included attendance at cultural events, sorry business and mourning time, lack of parenting skills, drug and alcohol dependency, mental health factors and community issues such as community violence and warring. An example was provided of community warring and infighting in Wadeye that often resulted in normal activities not happening in the community. This had the potential to affect a parent’s ability to enrol their child in school. Under such situations, however, the provision of special circumstance exemptions was usually applied to address the issue.

In QLD, the feedback from the 2011 SEAM process review indicated that, given most trial schools were located in suburban areas, only in extenuating circumstances was the 14-day compliance period not sufficient for parents to meet their obligations under the enrolment component of SEAM. In most cases, these extenuating circumstances were clearly apparent and could be dealt with accordingly. Common reasons that parents had not yet provided details included being unaware they needed to (as it was assumed enrolment was an automated process) or being under the impression they had already provided the necessary details. It was rarely the case that a child was found to be non-enrolled.

### 7.2.2. Threat effect of enrolment notification letters

In the situation when no current enrolment details were identified, parents were notified about their obligation to provide enrolment information of in-scope child(ren) under SEAM. It appeared that in most situations, enrolment notification letters were sufficient to remind parents to provide the enrolment details of their school-age child.

The response rate to each stage of the enrolment component of SEAM was generally good, as shown in Table 7.2.2. After receiving the enrolment notification letters, 87 per cent of SEAM parents in the NT and 95 per cent in QLD provided the enrolment details of their school-age child without having income support payment being suspended. This suggests

<sup>32</sup> Note that an extra seven days was allowed to take into account the postage time frame if the notification letter was delivered by the Australian Post.

that the notification letter and therefore the threat of a sanction was sufficient to ensure the effectiveness of the enrolment component without progressing to a sanction.

**Table 7.2.2: proportion of parents providing enrolment details at various stages after the notification letter**

Stages of enrolment verification process	NT	QLD
1. After enrolment notification letter, prior to follow-up contact	60%	83%
2. after follow-up contact before payments suspended	27%	12%
3. after the suspension of income support payments	13%	5%

For those whose income support payments were suspended under the enrolment component of SEAM, only a few of these children were genuinely not enrolled at the time the sanction was applied and their parents enrolled them within two weeks of the sanction. The remaining sanctions were applied due to parents' failure to respond to the notification letter and sanctions were lifted when the parents notified DHS of enrolment details.

Flowcharts detailing the progression of parents and children through the enrolment stages of the SEAM enrolment component are presented at [Appendix 17](#) and [Appendix 18](#).

### **7.3. Was SEAM the solution to tackle the non-enrolment issue?**

The enrolment component of SEAM was targeted at reducing the number of non-enrolled children who met the in-scope criteria. The implementation of the SEAM enrolment component in the NT and QLD during the trial was effective in gathering enrolment details from parents, as described in the previous sections.

Qualitative evidence shows that enrolment notification letters sent during the trial period had some impact in re-engaging students who had been absent from the schooling system for a short period of time. But there was no evidence to conclusively identify any children who had been disengaged from the education system for a long period of time. Moreover, it was also not possible, from data available, to estimate the number of children who were disengaged from the education system, nor establish the prevalence of non-enrolment among children subject to SEAM. For instance, qualitative evidence from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork suggests that some children in the NT might not be identified or captured in income support/schooling records and were living in what is referred to as the 'Long Grass' for periods of time.

As already reported in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, the high level of compliance among parents is not in itself sufficient evidence that enrolments increased because of SEAM.

#### **7.3.1. Enrolment patterns**

Given that a student's transfer across local or interstate schools can occur at any time during the year, the verification of enrolment details once a year (or up to twice a year in 2011<sup>33</sup>)

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<sup>33</sup> In 2011, QLD DETE introduced a second enrolment verification process mid-way through the school year.

can only capture the enrolment status of in scope children at the verification date. The lack of enrolment tracking data cross different education systems in different states and territories means it was not possible to identify children who may have been disengaged after the verification. In the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report a sizeable proportion of children were found to have enrolment data recorded only for part of the school year based on the enrolment data provided by education authorities in the NT and QLD. These students may have moved interstate or to non-government schools where enrolment data wasn't available.

Using enrolment data for students enrolled in SEAM participating schools as well comparison schools in both NT and QLD sites, quantitative analysis was undertaken to examine the enrolment patterns for students enrolled during the trial period. The enrolment pattern was categorised into: children with full year enrolment data, with less than full year (but more than half year) enrolment data, or with less than half year enrolment data. Within each category, the data were further categorised as to whether the enrolment was a single spell or multiple spells.

As shown in Table 7.3.1, enrolment patterns were similar across students from SEAM schools and comparison schools. QLD students in Logan sites and NT CEO students had the highest recorded full year enrolment, accounting for about 80 per cent of students. The proportion of students with full year enrolment data recorded was relatively low for NT DET students (about 60 per cent). In the QLD remote sites, about 70 per cent of students were recorded as full year enrolments.

Students with less than half year enrolment ranged from just under 10 per cent to slightly over 20 per cent, with the highest rate observed for students in the QLD remote sites. Over 20 per cent of NT DET students were recorded with more than half year enrolment but less than full year enrolment data. But the majority of NT DET students in this category were recorded with multiple enrolment spells. The highest proportion of multiple enrolment spells was also found for NT DET students with full year or with less than half year enrolment data. This is consistent with the general understanding of the high transient nature of students in the NT remote communities. Alternatively, the high proportion of multiple enrolment spells for NT DET students may be related to the stringent recording of student movements among government schools in the NT DET education data system,<sup>34</sup> which had the capacity to capture student enrolments across the NT government schools. In contrast, there was hardly any multiple enrolment spells captured for NT CEO students, which may be partly related to how the enrolment details were captured in the NT CEO's education data base. In addition, currently there is no enrolment data sharing between different schooling systems, e.g. between NT DET government schools and NT CEO schools.

The identified enrolment patterns highlight the need to track and monitor student enrolment movements to ensure continuing schooling engagement. Given that the

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that NT DET has stringent guidelines to follow when a child leaves school in the middle of the year. These guidelines aim to ensure that children do not become disengaged from the education system.

enrolment verification of SEAM was a point-in-time process, it had limited effectiveness in tracking the change of enrolment throughout the school year.

Similar findings were presented in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report. It was found that only around 40 per cent of NT DET SEAM children remained enrolled for the rest of the school year after receiving an enrolment notification letter while it was much higher for QLD SEAM children (over 90 per cent). The variation in enrolment sustainability may be influenced by the higher mobility of families living in NT remote sites. Children in the NT who enrolled within the month after receiving a notification letter were markedly more likely to disappear in the enrolment data base at some point during the school year. It was unknown whether these children were disengaged or had moved to be enrolled at a different school as there is no national enrolment system to easily identify the reason behind these observations.

**Table 7.3.1: Average yearly enrolment patterns, 2009 – 2012**

	enrolment data (less than half year)			enrolment data (less than full year)			enrolment data (full year)		
	single	multiple	total	single	multiple	total	single	multiple	total
<b>NT DET</b>									
SEAM students	7.8%	5.5%	13.3%	6.1%	22.1%	28.2%	38.3%	20.2%	58.5%
students from SEAM schools	9.5%	5.2%	14.7%	6.0%	16.7%	22.7%	46.9%	15.8%	62.7%
students from comparison schools	7.8%	5.5%	13.3%	6.1%	27.1%	33.2%	23.4%	30.1%	53.5%
<b>NT CEO</b>									
SEAM students	6.9%	0.0%	6.9%	6.4%	0.1%	6.5%	86.4%	0.2%	86.6%
students from SEAM schools	11.3%	0.0%	11.3%	9.3%	0.0%	9.3%	78.9%	0.5%	79.4%
students from comparison schools	12.5%	0.0%	12.5%	9.2%	0.0%	9.2%	78.1%	0.1%	78.3%
<b>QLD Logan sites</b>									
SEAM students	9.2%	1.1%	10.3%	5.8%	2.3%	8.1%	66.1%	15.5%	81.6%
students from SEAM schools	10.4%	0.9%	11.3%	8.2%	1.9%	10.1%	65.0%	13.5%	78.6%
students from comparison schools	7.2%	0.6%	7.8%	6.6%	1.3%	7.9%	68.7%	15.5%	84.3%
<b>QLD remote sites</b>									
SEAM students	13.0%	1.4%	14.5%	6.6%	4.8%	11.4%	62.5%	11.5%	74.1%
students from SEAM schools	17.5%	1.6%	19.1%	6.8%	4.2%	11.0%	59.9%	10.0%	70.0%
students from comparison schools	21.0%	2.0%	23.1%	11.0%	3.4%	14.4%	53.8%	8.7%	62.5%

### 7.3.2. Mechanism for tracking enrolment information

The enrolment information exchange process identified students who were not found by linking enrolment data to DHS SEAM customer data. But students whose enrolment details were provided at the start of the year may have become unenrolled for various reasons. There was no mechanism to ensure that all SEAM-eligible children remained enrolled at a school or eligible education alternative throughout the year. The analysis presented in section 7.3.1 shows a sizeable proportion of students whose enrolment details were not recorded for the full school year in both government and non-government schooling systems in the NT and QLD. As the student data system is operated independently within school systems for each state and territory, this has clearly presented a policy challenge in tackling potential non-enrolment.

The School Attendance Project,<sup>35</sup> conducted by Access Economics in 2009, identified four key elements for a successful programme aimed to improve school attendance:

Successful programmes appear to have four elements: ongoing tracking (*data requirements*); rapid response time (effective process); education of parents and students on the importance of school attendance (*parental and student attitude*); application of sanctions when all else has failed and follow-up support to students where sanctions have been applied (*punitive measure and support*).

One important component of the SEAM trial was to ensure children of compulsory school age be enrolled. Parents/children in scope for SEAM generally complied with the requirement of providing enrolment details at the once a year verification process, suggesting SEAM was effective in identifying and preventing non-enrolment at a particular point in time. However, students can become unenrolled throughout the school year for various reasons, including by moving between states. Potential unenrolment in between enrolment verification dates could have an adverse impact on student learning outcomes. Although second enrolment information exchange was introduced at the later stage of the trial, given this involved a lengthy manual process and was also point-in-time, it did not address the problem. Without a consistent and robust national student data tracking system, the SEAM process was limited and hence SEAM was not the solution/mechanism to resolve non-enrolment.

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<sup>35</sup> The School Attendance Project was commissioned by the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to be conducted by Access Economics in 2009.



## 8. IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT EVALUATION OF THE ATTENDANCE COMPONENT

### Evaluation Questions and Key Findings:

*EQ.4 How did the process changes implemented over the trial period impact on the effectiveness of the attendance component of the SEAM trial?*

The implementation of the automatic attendance referral process in place of the discretionary approach in the NT in 2010 was intended to ensure that all students were treated consistently by applying a pre-determined attendance benchmark. This approach also automated the process of identifying students with attendance problems.

In the event, the change increased the number of students being referred under SEAM. This meant more students with attendance issues came to the attention of DHS social workers than would otherwise have been the case.

The referral process, however, was a data driven process which in theory required a high level of IT requirements for real time data exchange. In practice, no funding was provided to build a system to exchange the attendance data. As a result, the existing data systems in schools appeared to be insufficient in coping with the intensive data tasks. In particular, participating schools found the process had become an onerous administrative burden. Consequently, delay in data exchange affected the process for timely decisions, and in some situations, decisions may have been made using out-dated information. The inadequacy of data infrastructure, to some extent, jeopardised the effectiveness of the SEAM process in response to attendance issues.

*EQ.5 To what extent did the attendance component of the SEAM trial have an impact on school attendance of SEAM students by addressing unauthorised absences, and in particular, how did the provision of social worker contact along with issuing attendance notices affect the attendance outcomes of SEAM children?*

#### Impact analysis on the SEAM effect

Central to the final evaluation of the SEAM trial is to identify the impact of the trial against a counterfactual. This involves measuring the average effect of the trial on the unauthorised absence rate of SEAM children, compared to what would have occurred in the absence of the trial by using a statistically selected comparison group. The analysis was conducted by adjusting for demographic factors (such as age, gender and Indigenous status) and various family circumstances (such as being in a persistently jobless family, parent having a reported medical condition, parent being in a vulnerable situation, having a change in the child care arrangement and having moved house). The findings from the impact analysis show that:

- For SEAM students attending NT DET schools (i.e. government schools), no statistically significant effect from the SEAM trial was detected on reducing SEAM students' rates of unauthorised absence throughout the trial, even when controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances. The average SEAM effect was a reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences (2.44 percentage points in the first

year of the trial and 0.19 percentage points over the trial), but the impact results were not statistically significant.

- For SEAM students attending NT CEO schools (i.e. non-government Catholic schools), a statistically significant effect of the SEAM trial on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences was detected. When controlling for demographic characteristics and various family circumstances, there was a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students (8.16 percentage points in the first year and 6.09 percentage points over the trial) compared to the comparison group. Clearly, the SEAM effect was strongest at the early stage of the trial and lessened as the trial progressed.
- The difference in outcomes between Catholic schools and government schools in the NT may be partly because SEAM was trialed in fewer, more homogeneous NT CEO schools with the largest participating school very supportive of SEAM which was evident from the qualitative research undertaken. There were more NT DET schools involved in SEAM, suggesting more diverse school and community environments. Therefore, if there was a statistically significant effect for SEAM students in some participating schools, it was likely to have been offset by insignificant results in other schools, when the average SEAM effect was measured across all NT DET schools. Moreover, there was a higher proportion of NT CEO students who were issued with an attendance notice who also received social work support than NT DET students. As discussed later, social work support appears to be a critical factor in reducing unauthorised absences.
- In both Logan and remote sites in QLD, it was evident that SEAM led to a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences for the first year of the trial. For SEAM students in Logan sites, when accounting for demographic factors and family circumstances, the average rate of unauthorised absences reduced statistically significant (0.72 percentage points in the first year of the trial) for SEAM students, compared to comparison students. Over the trial, the average rate of unauthorised absences reduced by 0.43 percentage points for SEAM students compared to the comparison group, although this result was not statistically significant.<sup>36</sup>
- For SEAM students in QLD remote sites, compared to the comparison group, when adjusting for demographic factors and family circumstances, the average SEAM effect was also statistically significant with a reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences by 9.21 percentage points for the first year of the trial. Over the trial, the rate of unauthorised absences reduced by 1.11 percentage points for SEAM students, compared to the comparison group; but this result was not statistically significant.<sup>29</sup>
- Due to the discretionary nature of the attendance referral model implemented in QLD, participating schools were free to decide if they used SEAM to make referrals.

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<sup>36</sup> Compared to unadjusted estimates (i.e. when associated factors were not included in the analysis), adjusted estimates were more sensitive to the sample and cell size when broken down by these factors, which could be too small to detect statistical significance.

Further analysis of QLD results suggests that the SEAM effect was more likely to have been sustained for students in SEAM schools in Logan sites which were actively participating in SEAM (i.e. where attendance notices were ever issued under SEAM). Restricting the analysis to those Logan schools which actually made referrals under SEAM, it was found that, when controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances, the average SEAM effect was a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences (1.45 percentage points in the first year and 0.94 percentage points over the trial). This suggests that the appropriate use of SEAM along with a suite of policy measures aimed at improving attendance helped these SEAM schools to effectively address unauthorised absences. In contrast, for SEAM schools in Logan which were less actively participating in SEAM (i.e. where no SEAM attendance notices were issued), there was a statistically significant higher rate of unauthorised absences (1.04 percentage points in the first year and 1.14 percentage points over the trial) for SEAM students, compared to comparison students.

- Where the average SEAM effect was statistically significant, the proportional size of the effect was more substantial for SEAM students in remote sites than suburban sites such as Logan. This is because students in remote sites generally had experienced more severe unauthorised absence issues, and thus there was greater potential for improvement.

#### *Relationship between demographic factors and unauthorised absences*

The impact analysis included accounting for relevant demographic characteristics and various family circumstances. Unauthorised absences were found to be positively correlated with age and being an Indigenous student, and were generally higher with the presence of family circumstances such as being in a persistently jobless family, having a change in the care arrangement of students and having moved house. For estimates that were statistically significant, it was found that over the trial period:

- With an additional one year in age, the rate of unauthorised absences was higher by 3.76 percentage points, 2.97 percentage points, 0.36 percentage points and 1.20 percentage points respectively for NT DET, NT CEO, QLD Logan and QLD remote SEAM students. For SEAM students in Logan who were identified with Indigenous status, the rate of unauthorised absences increased by 0.96 percentage points.
- The rate of unauthorised absences was higher by 0.75 percentage points for SEAM students in Logan sites if they came from a persistently jobless family, by 0.89 percentage points if there was a change in the child care arrangement, and by 0.73 percentage points if they had moved house. Similarly for SEAM students in QLD remote sites, the rate of unauthorised absences was higher by 6.16 percentage points if there was a change in the child care arrangement and by 8.31 percentage points for those who had moved house.

#### *Threat effect*

Results from both the quantitative and qualitative analysis confirmed that the SEAM effect on reducing unauthorised absences was largely attributed to the threat effect under SEAM.

- The observed SEAM effect in reducing unauthorised absences at an early stage in the trial (i.e. the first year of the trial) suggests that the threat effect was present at

the commencement of the trial, in line with what would be expected from a deterrent strategy such as SEAM. The qualitative information collected was also consistent with this result, which showed that the threat effect occurred when parents became aware of the trial.

- There was qualitative evidence to suggest that the threat effect also occurred when SEAM messages and requirements were further communicated to parents, e.g. when parents were issued with a SEAM notice, or were contacted by the DHS social worker.
- In NT sites, the SEAM threat effect was not sustained throughout the trial. Qualitative information suggests that families were receptive to the trial and schools were generally encouraged by the reaction at the initial stage of the trial. Practical difficulties and challenges arising from the implementation of the SEAM trial, however, had limited its effectiveness over time. It was noted that the threat had not been backed up by prompt responses/implications such as suspension in payments and thus behavioural change was not sustained.
- From the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork, school principals reported that parents discussed amongst themselves the implications of SEAM and there seemed to be a response either to positively respond or in some cases, move out of scope. It was noted by school staff in QLD that some parents were unaware that the trial ceased in mid-2012, and consequently the threat of SEAM continued to have an effect.

#### Effect of social work contact

The provision of social work contact by the DHS was one of the critical elements for the SEAM trial. The support services were intended to address complex barriers SEAM families experienced. SEAM was acting as a trigger for social work contact with families which may not have occurred otherwise.

- Under SEAM, DHS social workers were required to make contact with parents of referred students who received an attendance notice. Given the possible suspension of income support payments for failure to comply with SEAM requirements, social work contact was critical in supporting referred families.
- It was found that referred students in NT CEO schools had the highest proportion (70 per cent) receiving social work contact, while just over half of NT DET referred students and around one-third of QLD referred students received social work contact. Overall, SEAM students whose parents received social work contact accounted for 57.4 per cent of those that were actually referred.
- Consistent with the finding from the 2010 SEAM evaluation, social work contact helped to reduce unauthorised absences of referred students during the compliance period. In most cases, a single contact from social workers may have been sufficient to positively ensure compliance by in-scope parents. For some very complex cases, however, the support provided under SEAM was intensive, and on-going follow-up and long-term interventions were required to ensure behavioural change.
- The reduction in unauthorised absences for referred students during the 28-day compliance period was substantial for some students, but a relapse tended to occur

post compliance period. It was found, for those with social work contact, the relapse was less likely to have occurred.

The effectiveness of social work contact under SEAM was dependent on the attendance referral model within which social work contact operated. It was more challenging for social workers in NT sites to provide support under the automatic referral process and using the remote servicing model. But for social work contact in QLD, particularly in Logan, the support was more intensive and targeted, although similar challenges to those in the NT arose in QLD remote sites as a result of use of the remote servicing model.

- In the NT, the automatic referral model presented a logistical challenge for social workers given a larger number of referrals taking place within a short timeframe. The delay in data exchange also impeded prompt action in response to attendance issues. Due to privacy concerns, social workers were constrained, to some extent, in their interaction with participating schools, as any information related to a parent being issued with an attendance notice and/or suspended was not allowed to be disclosed to relevant schools.
- In QLD, particularly in Logan sites, the support provided by DHS social workers was directed to more complex cases with more frequent contacts being offered, since the referral was at the discretion of school principals and better targeting was possible. Evidence suggests that social workers also generally felt a good rapport with schools and the interaction with schools was effective.
- In remote communities in both the NT and QLD sites, DHS social workers experienced difficulties in providing services effectively. The remote servicing meant that social work support was possibly not available on time for those needing it. The staff turnover was reported to be high over the trial period, which presented challenges in ensuring a consistent approach in remote servicing. A lack of material aid services in these communities also meant that social workers could not refer affected families onto further services, particularly during suspension periods.

The effect of social work contact is a contributing factor to the SEAM evaluation results, and as is evident, the additional support from social work contact seemed to have led to a positive impact especially for those with broad vulnerabilities. Such an effect is also largely dependent on the level and adequacy of the support which varies with the actual situation and its complexity. Therefore, the effect of social work contact for a particular subgroup (e.g. those with broad vulnerabilities), although statistically significant, was masked when the impact result was estimated across all SEAM students.

*EQ.6 Were there any differences in impact from the SEAM trial which can be attributed to family characteristics?*

The analysis showed that the impact from the SEAM trial may be different for different family circumstances, in particular, families reporting medical conditions or being in a vulnerable situation.

- A statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was found for NT DET students (5.47 percentage points in the first year of the trial and 7.13 percentage points over the trial period), and for QLD Logan students (1.02

percentage points in the first year of the trial), who were from families ever reporting medical conditions.

- A reduction in unauthorised absences was also found to be statistically significant (7.00 percentage points in the first year and 5.28 percentage points over the trial period) for SEAM students in NT DET schools who were from families ever reporting to be in a vulnerable situation. For SEAM students in a similar family circumstance in QLD Logan sites, the reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was statistically significant (unauthorised absences reduced by 1.04 percentage points in the first year and over the trial period), compared to comparison students.

These results may suggest for those reporting medical conditions and vulnerabilities, SEAM seemed to have had a positive impact on reducing unauthorised absences, which is likely to be attributable to the additional social work support provided under SEAM.

## **8.1. Assessing attendance referral models under SEAM**

The attendance component of SEAM was implemented differently in the NT and QLD over the trial period. The evaluation of the impact from the SEAM trial on attendance requires an understanding of operational features of each referral model. In this section, the pros and cons of attendance referral models in the NT and QLD are examined from the perspective of participating schools and DHS social workers, using qualitative information collected from the 2011 SEAM process review and the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork.

### **8.1.1. Attendance referral model in the NT**

Prior to July 2010, the attendance referral process in NT sites was at the discretion of school principals. After July 2010, the attendance process that operated in the NT was changed to a fortnightly attendance referral process with a fixed benchmark to define unsatisfactory attendance. The implementation of the automatic referral process in place of discretionary approach was to ensure all students were being consistently treated. It also meant that schools were not seen by families as responsible for any payment suspensions. This helped to stop repercussions occurring for school staff in the community.

As described in detail in Section 2.2.2, the automatic referral involved intensive data exchange between participating schools and DHS via education authorities every fortnight and therefore, resulted in substantial burden for participating schools.

Feedback received from school principals from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork highlighted the demanding, manual and time-consuming nature of the data exchange process which was considered to place administrative burden on the school. Without being properly funded, most school principals interviewed felt that monitoring and reporting of student attendance data was very time consuming. There was little consistency in when the data would be received and the delay in data exchange may have jeopardised the effectiveness of the process, particularly when attendance notices were being sent out based on out-dated data. Interviewed principals, in general, felt their involvement under the automatic referral process was mainly required for data exchange; however, they were generally not notified when notices were issued or suspensions took place under SEAM.

From social workers' perspective, the biggest challenge under the automatic referral process was its lack of flexibility to acknowledge gradual improvements, according to the feedback received in the 2011 SEAM process review. The punitive nature of the policy left no room for rewarding small improvements in attendance. For example, social workers indicated that a child who improved their attendance rate from 50 to 70 per cent should not be 'punished', but rather, their improvement should be recognised as an achievement, based on the strength-based approach social workers usually applied when dealing with families.

Social workers' direct interaction with schools was also limited due to the nature of the exchange process and privacy constraints. Feedback in the 2011 SEAM process review indicated that DHS social workers could no longer take advice directly from schools – the nature of the exchange process required that DHS only act on information provided by education authorities. It was noted that long-term behavioural change required the support of both community and schools but this was limited as the contact with the school or community by social workers was restricted. Due to privacy requirements, social workers

were not allowed to disclose information about parents who were issued with a notice or suspended to the school. Consequently, this may have impeded effective consultative relationships according to feedback from schools interviewed in 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork.

Under the automatic referral process, more students were referred which presented a logistical challenge for social work contact, particularly for remote servicing, as social workers were required to follow up within 7-days of the notice being issued. The data lags previously mentioned also made it particularly hard for social workers to monitor individual cases.

In the 2011 SEAM process review and 2013 SEAM fieldwork, concerns were raised around the size of student name lists for scope checking under the automatic referral process. The automatic nature of the referral process and the use of a fixed benchmark added to the number of fortnightly attendance referrals and the process was confounded by the fact that many children frequently move in or out of scope (due to moving house, their parents losing or gaining income support payments, or transferring children between carers), particularly in remote areas.

#### 8.1.2. Attendance referral model in QLD

Attendance referrals made by SEAM participating schools in QLD sites were at the discretion of the school principal. The discretionary nature of the referral model meant that the referral could take place at any stage of the process in dealing with attendance problems. School-based intervention was usually the preferred option by schools in QLD and SEAM referrals were used as the last resort. The discretionary approach also enabled school principals to make use of SEAM referrals at the very start of the process should that be considered the most effective and appropriate means. Feedback received from school principals interviewed in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork indicated that SEAM was perceived as an additional strategy available for improving school attendance. But the discretionary nature of the QLD referral model also meant that principals at participating schools were free to decide if they used SEAM to make referrals. In cases where SEAM was not being used by principals, there was no threat of suspension and, therefore, SEAM was effectively not implemented.

With the SEAM trial in QLD implemented in both the suburban (Logan) area as well as in the remote communities (Doomadgee and Mornington Island), demographic differences resulted in distinctly different feedback on the attendance referral model given by SEAM schools and DHS social workers as part of the 2011 SEAM process review.

The major issue identified with the discretionary approach in remote communities was safety concerns for school staff who were perceived to be responsible for making referrals. This was less of an issue for schools in the Logan area where school principals were generally less concerned with repercussions from families who were referred. Reasons for the difference were probably because, in a remote community, school staff generally lived within the community and had less opportunity to avoid potential community backlash. In addition, some schools in the Logan area did not take part in the trial. According to qualitative evidence, this may have been because SEAM was perceived by some principals as



a penalty on families and therefore they were opposed to SEAM. For those who did take part, feedback from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork indicated that the data exchange added administrative burden on schools. That was because schools had to log into a secure portal to access this information due to privacy concerns, and this was perceived as a time-consuming process.

Based on feedback from the 2011 SEAM process review, views on the advantages and disadvantages of the referral process operating in QLD were also influenced by regional differences. In Logan sites, respondents noted that the advantage of the referral process was mainly related to increased communication between schools, families and social workers. Increased communication enabled schools to be more aware of issues facing families, including mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems, gambling and other addictions, domestic violence and abuse. The referral process, at the discretion of school principals, facilitated support services for families via DHS social worker support and extended services to schools more broadly. In addition, respondents indicated that data delays were not as problematic in QLD, particularly in suburban areas. This was in contrast to the automatic referral process operating in the NT, as QLD schools were able to directly refer to DHS and DHS could promptly deal with cases under this model.

## 8.2. Impact analysis of the SEAM trial on reducing unauthorised absences

The question central to the final evaluation of the SEAM trial is whether the trial had an impact on school attendance of children whose parents were subject to SEAM schooling requirements for receiving income support payments. That is, to what extent any change in school attendance of SEAM students, in particular the reduction in unauthorised absences, could be attributed to the trial.

Under the SEAM pilot improving outcomes for students was the focus. While the outcome of the study (i.e. attendance) was observable for SEAM students over the trial period, it was not possible to directly observe their attendance had they not been treated over the same period. Therefore, to measure the effect of the treatment, it is necessary to identify the counterfactual, whereby the outcome for SEAM students in the absence of the trial could be approximated. Various evaluation methods have been developed to assess the impact of a 'treatment', and the application of these methods depends on the design of the experiment and the available data. Broadly, there are *randomised* experiments, the 'gold standard' in policy trials and evaluations, where the treatment group and counterfactual are randomly assigned, and *non-randomised* experiments where such an approach is not possible or not used for various reasons. As participation in the SEAM trial does not occur at random, the impact analysis of the SEAM trial is conducted using a quasi-experimental approach (namely 'difference-in-differences' methodology) comparing the SEAM treatment group and a similar comparison group not subject to SEAM.

In the following discussion and reporting on the impact analysis results, the first section provides a brief description on methodology including the construction of treatment and comparison groups. The second section presents the trend on average unauthorised absence rates over 2008 to 2012 for SEAM and comparison students. Following this are the findings from the impact analysis on the average treatment effect of the trial. Lastly, post-trial analysis is presented to examine if the SEAM effect has been maintained over the semester after the end of the trial.

### 8.2.1. Difference-in-differences method for impact analysis

The difference-in-differences method, as part of a quasi-experimental framework, is a commonly used evaluation method applicable to a non-randomised experiment such as SEAM. It is used to estimate the average effect of a policy intervention by comparing the difference in outcomes between treatment and comparison groups before and after the implementation of the intervention.

SEAM had a focus on providing support to individual families in addressing the issue of unauthorised absences. Therefore, the focus was to measure the average rate of unauthorised absences at the student level. That is, to estimate the average outcomes for SEAM students in terms of the annual rate of unauthorised absences compared to what would have happened in the absence of the trial.

In this case, the treatment group includes students who attended one of the SEAM schools and were ever subject to SEAM. The construction of the comparison group was achieved by identifying students who would have been subject to SEAM (using the same set of criteria

for SEAM eligibility), if SEAM had been applied to their residential location and the school they attended.

In identifying comparison students, the key step was to select comparison schools (which these students attended), which were similar to SEAM schools in terms of the institution type (government schools/non-government schools), school type (primary/secondary), school ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) score, total enrolment, attendance rate, proportion of Indigenous students and remoteness. While the comparison schools had similar absence rates to the SEAM schools, their rates of unauthorised absences were not necessarily similar as it was not possible to disentangle the rate of unauthorised absences from the absence rate.<sup>37</sup> Also taken into consideration is the implementation of multiple policy measures in some of the SEAM schools over the trial period that also aimed to improve attendance such as the Smart Schools National Partnerships for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities.

Most SEAM schools in QLD Logan sites were subject to multiple measures<sup>38</sup> in addition to SEAM. This means, unless the comparison schools were also subject to the same policy conditions, the impact analysis would not be able to eliminate the potential effect of measures other than SEAM. Therefore, instead of identifying comparison students from selected comparison schools, comparison students in the Logan sites were identified from the SEAM schools. In the Logan area, some SEAM schools were located in the trial sites while others were outside the trial sites. For a student to have been included in SEAM, he/she had to live in the trial site and attend one of the SEAM schools. It was possible that students in Logan attended one of the SEAM schools but lived outside the trial site, and thus were not subject to SEAM. Therefore, for SEAM students in the Logan sites, the counterfactual was constructed by identifying students who attended one of the SEAM schools and who would have been otherwise included in SEAM if they were living in the trial sites. It should be noted that there is some possibility that just being in a SEAM school, regardless of actually being subject to SEAM, may have had some effect and therefore the impact analysis might underestimate the true impact.

For SEAM students in remote sites (including QLD sites such as Doomadgee and Mornington Island and all NT sites), the counterfactual is constructed by identifying students who attended a comparison school and would have been subject to SEAM if SEAM was applied to the comparison school. A summary of treatment and comparison groups for different SEAM sites is presented in Table 8.2.1.

Summary statistics on the selection of comparison schools is presented at [Appendix 11](#). Maps of locations of SEAM and comparison schools are presented at [Appendixes 12, 13 and](#)

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<sup>37</sup> The absence rate includes the measure of 'authorised absences' and 'unauthorised absences'. 'Authorised absences' refer to instances where a student's absence from school is considered authorised or approved (e.g. absence due to illness, sorry business or holidays), where 'unauthorised absences' are defined as unexplained, un-notified or unacceptable absences from school.

<sup>38</sup> Most of SEAM schools in QLD Logan sites were also involved in the Every Child Counts initiative and the Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities initiative over the same period as the SEAM trial.

14. A detailed description of the difference-in-differences methodology is presented at [Appendix 15](#).

**Table 8.2.1: Summary of treatment and comparison groups for impact analysis**

<i>SEAM sites</i>	<i>treatment group</i>	<i>comparison group</i>
NT sites – NT DET schools	students attending one of NT DET schools participating in SEAM, who were ever subject to SEAM	students attending selected comparison schools who would have been subject to SEAM if SEAM was applied to these comparison schools
NT sites – NT CEO schools	students attending one of NT CEO schools participating in SEAM, who were ever subject to SEAM	students attending selected comparison schools who would have been subject to SEAM if SEAM was applied to these comparison schools
QLD Logan sites	students attending SEAM schools in QLD Logan sites, who were ever subject to SEAM	students attending SEAM schools in Logan sites who would have been subject to SEAM if living in one of the trial sites in Logan
QLD remote sites	students attending SEAM schools in QLD remote sites, who were ever subject to SEAM	students attending selected comparison schools who would have been subject to SEAM if SEAM was applied to these comparison schools

### 8.2.2. Trend of unauthorised absence rates between 2008 and 2012

Since the attendance issue of concern to the SEAM trial was unauthorised absences, the rate of unauthorised absences was adopted as the outcome measure of study in the impact analysis. In undertaking the first stage of the impact analysis, the trend of unauthorised absence rates was examined to observe any changes before and after the implementation of the trial (2008-12), among SEAM and comparison students. As the SEAM trial was introduced half way through the school year in 2009 in QLD and ended in the first semester in 2012 in both NT and QLD, the trend analysis in this section is presented on an annual basis and by semester. The following analysis makes use of a balanced panel data which includes SEAM and comparison students whose attendance records are available for the period of study. The balanced panel data preserves the invariant characteristics over time (i.e. the observed change is not due to the change in the characteristics of the population) so presents increased statistical power for the analysis.

#### **Northern Territory**

In the NT, SEAM participating schools<sup>39</sup> included both government schools administered by NT DET and non-government Catholic schools under the administration of the NT CEO. The

<sup>39</sup> Participating schools in NT sites also included one non-government school (Tiwi College) operated under the Tiwi Education Board. Due to the resource constraint, no attendance data were provided by the Tiwi College.

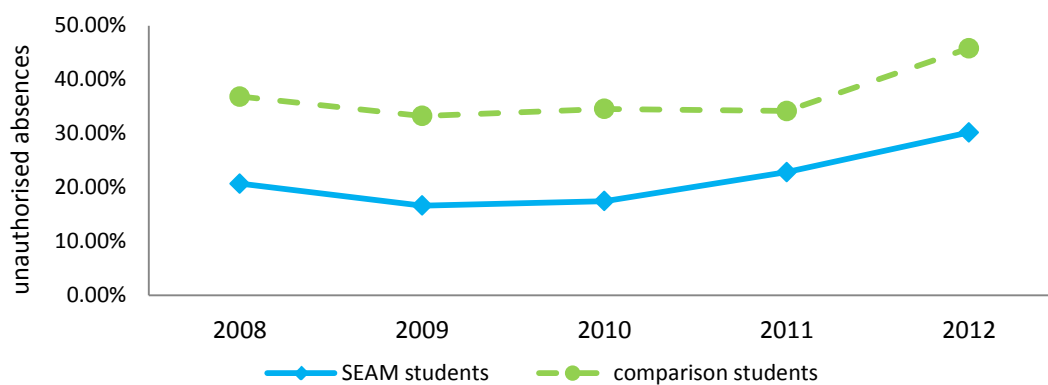
trend of unauthorised absence rates is analysed separately for students from NT DET and CEO schools.

*SEAM students in government schools (NT DET)*

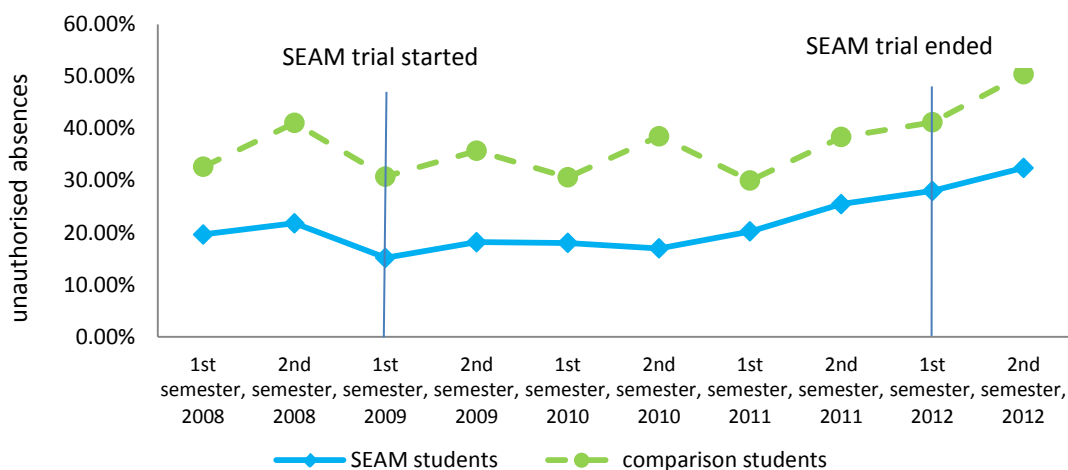
As shown in Figure 8.2.1, a gradual upward trend of unauthorised absence rates was observed for both NT DET SEAM and comparison students over the trial period, despite the average rate of unauthorised absences prior to the trial being much lower for SEAM students than for comparison students.<sup>40</sup> The rate of unauthorised absences amongst comparison students increased more sharply in 2012.

A breakdown of unauthorised absence rates by semester in Figure 8.2.2 shows a pattern of higher rates in the second semester than in the first semester between 2008 and 2009 for both SEAM and comparison students, with an upward trend in the rate of unauthorised absences seen from the second semester in 2010 for SEAM students and from the first semester in 2011 for comparison students.

**Figure 8.2.1: Average annual rate of unauthorised absences, NT DET**



**Figure 8.2.2: Average rate of unauthorised absences by semester, NT DET**

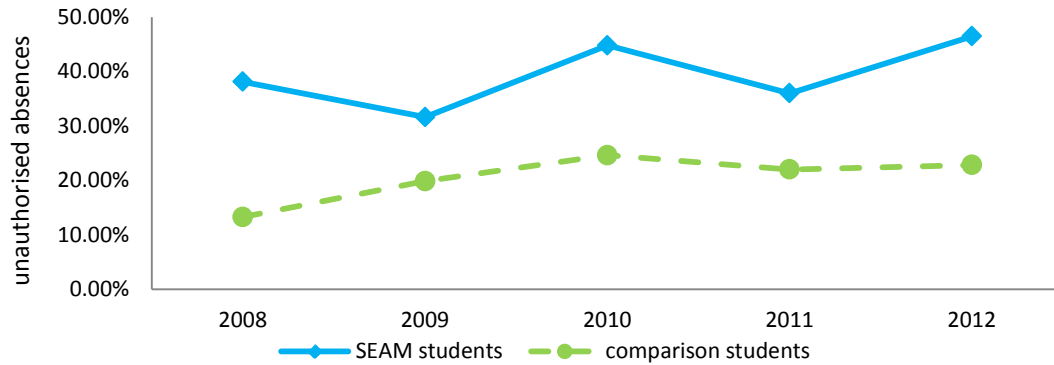


<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that such a discrepancy in the rate of unauthorised absences between SEAM and comparison students did not necessarily violate the underlying assumption for applying the difference-in-differences method as outlined in Section 8.2.1 (refer to Appendix 15 for more details).

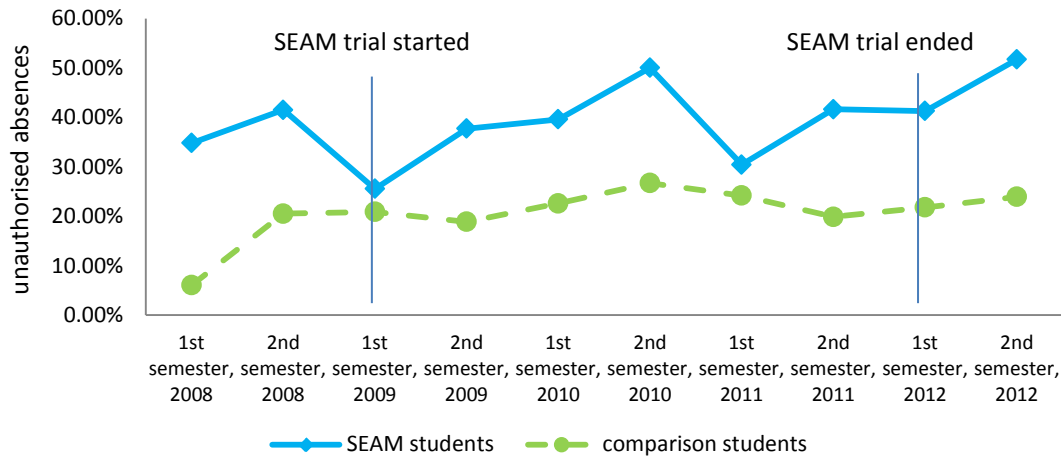
*SEAM students in non-government Catholic schools (NT CEO)*

As shown in Figure 8.2.3, there was an upward trend in the average rate of unauthorised absences for both SEAM and comparison students over the trial period, but it was more variable for SEAM students than for comparison students. In particular, as shown in Figure 8.2.4, a substantial reduction in unauthorised absences for SEAM students was observed in the first semester in 2009 and 2011. In contrast to the picture for students in NT DET schools, unauthorised absence rates were higher for SEAM students than for comparison students in NT CEO schools for the whole of the SEAM trial.

**Figure 8.2.3: Average annual rate of unauthorised absences, NT CEO**



**Figure 8.2.4: Average rate of unauthorised absences by semester, NT CEO**



**Queensland**

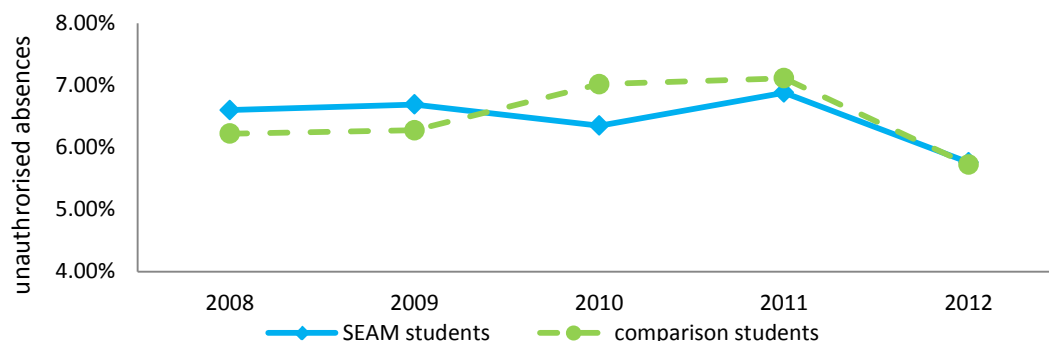
In QLD, SEAM sites covered suburban communities in the Logan area and remote communities in Doomadgee and Mornington Island. Due to the significant regional difference in absence patterns, the trend analysis is conducted separately for Logan sites and remote sites.

*SEAM students in Logan sites*

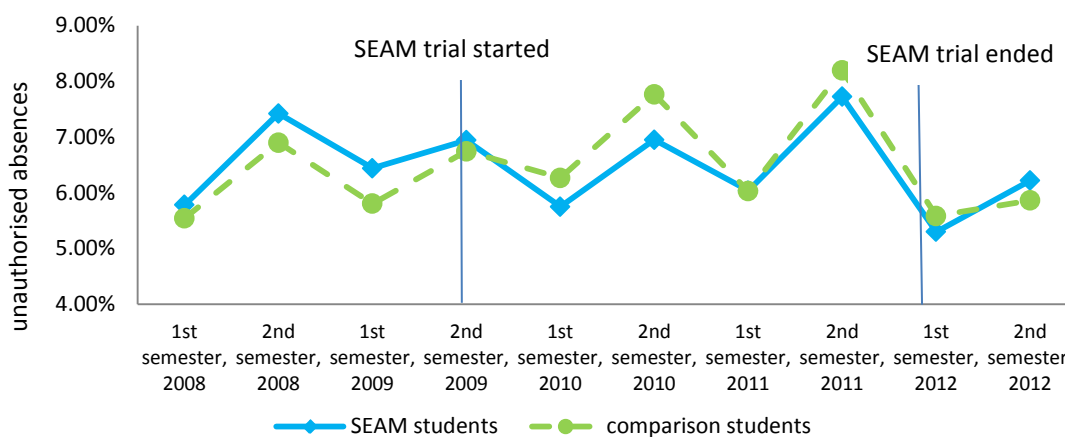
As shown in Figure 8.2.5, SEAM students exhibited a similar trend in the rate of unauthorised absences to comparison students prior to the trial. But between 2009 and 2010, a downward trend was observed for SEAM students. This was largely driven by a lower rate of increase in unauthorised absences in the second semester in 2009 and a higher rate of reduction in unauthorised absences in the first semester in 2010, as shown in Figure 8.2.6.

An interesting feature is the substantial reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences in 2012 for both SEAM and comparison students, which was actually larger for comparison students. It is not clear if there was any new policy measure introduced after the conclusion of the SEAM trial which may have led to the reduction.

**Figure 8.2.5: Average annual rate of unauthorised absences, QLD Logan**



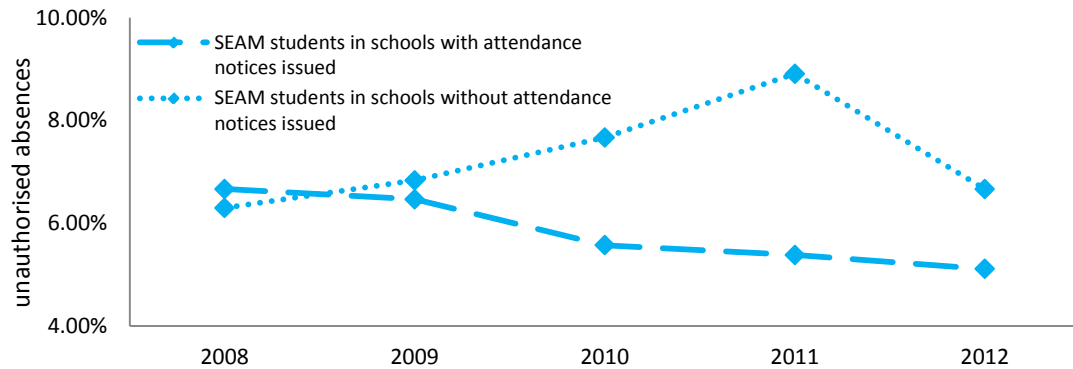
**Figure 8.2.6: Average rate of unauthorised absence by semester, QLD Logan**



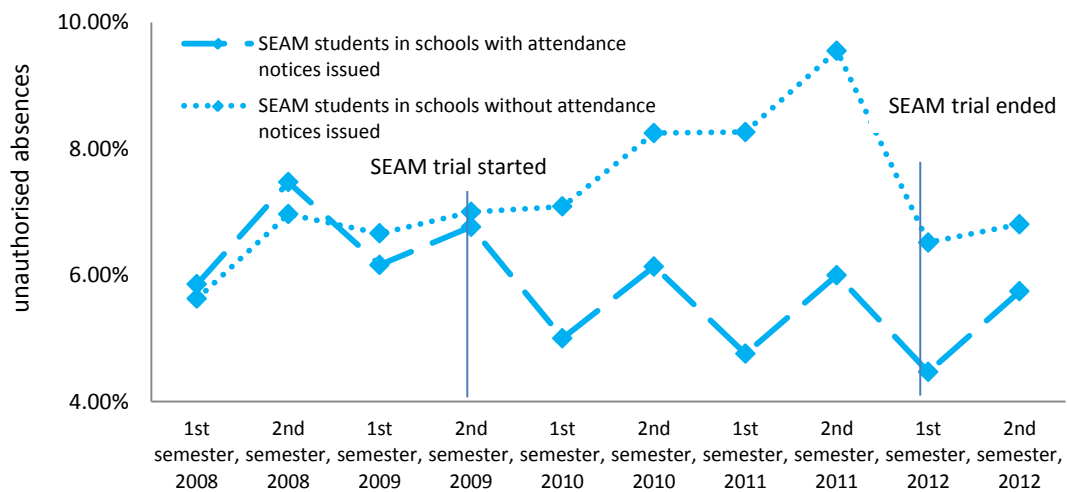
Since attendance referrals in QLD were at the discretion of school principals, more than half of SEAM schools in Logan (17 among 30 SEAM schools) had not actively participated in SEAM, i.e. no SEAM attendance notices were ever issued during the trial period. The following trend analysis (Figures 8.2.7 and 8.2.8) attempts to identify if SEAM students from SEAM schools with attendance notices issued may have responded differently to the trial compared with students from SEAM schools where attendance notices were not issued.

A clear downward trend in the average rate of unauthorised absences was observed over the trial period for SEAM students in SEAM schools where attendance notices were issued. For SEAM students in SEAM schools that didn't issue attendance notices, except for the first semester in 2009, an upward trend in unauthorised absences was evident until 2011. This result suggests that the SEAM effect may have been sustained for SEAM students in SEAM schools that actively participated in SEAM.

**Figure 8.2.7: Average annual rate of unauthorised absences by school participation of SEAM, QLD Logan**



**Figure 8.2.8: Average rate of unauthorised absences by school participation of SEAM by semester, QLD Logan**



*SEAM students in QLD remote sites*

As shown in Figures 8.2.9 and 8.2.10, there was a similar trend in the rate of unauthorised absences between 2008 and 2012 for SEAM and comparison students, except for the first semester in 2009 when a substantial reduction was observed for SEAM students.

**Figure 8.2.9: average annual rate of unauthorised absences, QLD remote sites**

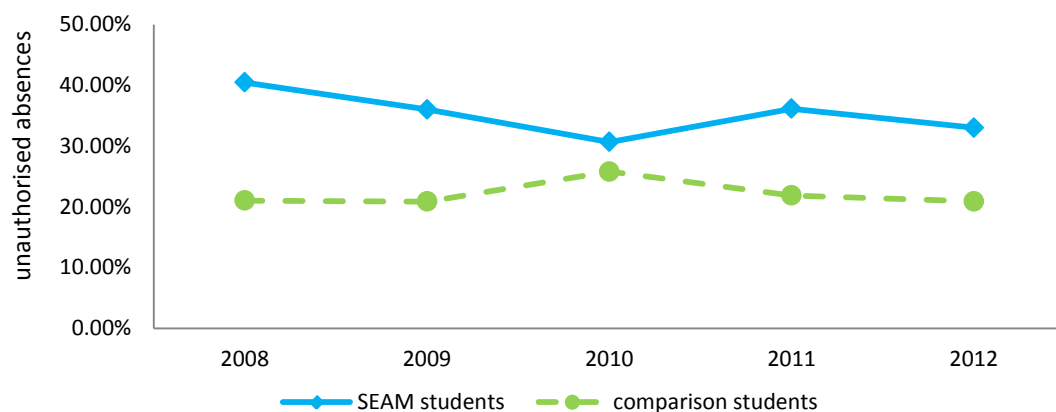
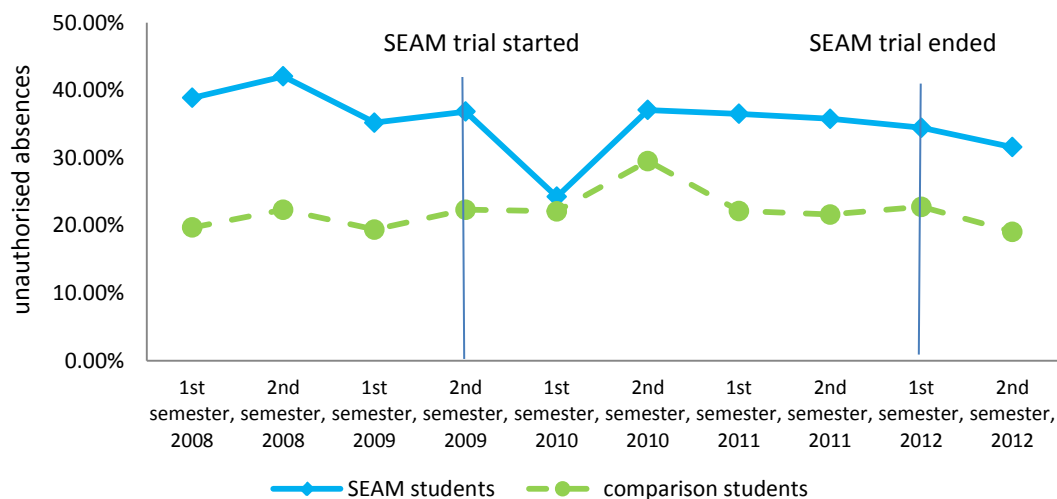




Figure 8.2.10: average rate of unauthorised absences by semester, QLD remote sites



### 8.2.3. Summary of the impact analysis for the SEAM trial

The core part of the impact analysis for the SEAM trial is to quantify the average SEAM effect, i.e. the effect of the SEAM trial on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences. The average SEAM effect is derived by comparing changes in the average rate of unauthorised absences before and after the implementation of the trial for SEAM and comparison students, and detecting if there is a statistically significant difference between the changes for the two groups.

The average rate of unauthorised absences in 2008 was used as the pre-trial outcome. While the average rate of unauthorised absences in the first year of SEAM was used as a post-trial outcome to measure the average SEAM effect at an early stage in the trial, the average rate over the trial period was used to measure the average SEAM effect for the entire trial.

Taken into consideration, when measuring the impact, were demographic factors such as age, gender and Indigenous status, and family circumstances including being in a persistently jobless family,<sup>41</sup> parent having a reported medical condition,<sup>42</sup> parent being in a vulnerable situation,<sup>43</sup> having a change in the child care arrangement, having moved house or having a parent/caregiver deceased in the family. These demographic factors and family circumstances were considered to affect students' school attendance.

The difference-in-differences approach using a regression framework was utilised to estimate the impact of the trial. The estimates of the SEAM effect with and without

<sup>41</sup> A persistently jobless family is defined as a family with at least one dependent child under the age of 16 where all parents (partnered or single) are in receipt of income support payments and have no reported earnings in the previous year.

<sup>42</sup> Medical condition details were recorded for each customer who has been medically assessed as having a medical illness or disability.

<sup>43</sup> This vulnerability indicator was derived by using several payment-related measures, including having reported in a vulnerable situation (vulnerable customers are defined as those with a high-risk of non-compliance with Centrelink or Job Services Australia requirements), having received the crisis payment, having reported to be homeless, and having reported to have a medical condition.

adjusting for demographic factors and family circumstances are presented in this section. The detailed description of this methodology is presented at [Appendix 15](#).

### Average SEAM effect – Northern Territory

In summary, results from the impact analysis showed that, in the NT sites, no statistically significant effect from SEAM was detected in reducing the rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students in NT DET schools, but the impact of SEAM was statistically significant for SEAM students in NT CEO schools.

#### *SEAM students in government schools (NT DET)*

As shown in Table 8.2.2, there was no statistically significant effect from the SEAM trial on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students attending NT DET schools (i.e. government schools) for the first year of the trial and over the trial period.

**Table 8.2.2: Average SEAM effect on SEAM students in government schools (NT DET)**

		first year of the trial	over the trial
Difference in average annual rate of unauthorised absences before SEAM (i.e. 2008) and on the completion of the SEAM trial	<i>SEAM students (1)</i>	-3.64%	1.81%
	<i>comparison students (2)</i>	-4.29%	-0.17%
average SEAM effect (unadjusted = (1)-(2))		0.65%	1.98%
average SEAM effect (adjusted for the following characteristics/factors)		-2.44%	-0.19%
- age		1.47%***	3.76%***
- gender		0.91%	1.39%
- Indigenous status		-3.95%	0.26%
- in a persistently jobless family		-1.41%	-1.63%
- parent having a reported medical condition		2.23%	3.69%
- parent being in a vulnerable situation		-1.39%	-3.16%
- having a change in the child care arrangement		2.34%	1.48%
- having moved house		-3.98%	-2.17%
- parent/caregiver deceased		-7.06%	-6.88%

\*\*\*statistically significant at 1% level; \*\*statistically significant at 5% level; \*statistically significant at 10% level

Note: Approximately 1750 SEAM students were enrolled in SEAM participating NT DET schools over the trial period.

It was found that the average rate of unauthorised absences reduced by 3.64 percentage points for SEAM students and by 4.29 percentage points for comparison students in the first year of the trial, compared to the pre-trial period (i.e. 2008). Over the trial period, the average rate of unauthorised absences was higher than in 2008 by 1.81 percentage points for SEAM students, but reduced by 0.17 percentage points for comparison students. These findings were consistent with the trend analysis presented in Section 8.2.2.

Without accounting for demographic factors and family circumstances, the analysis shows that no statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was observed (unauthorised absences increased by 0.65 percentage points for the first year and by 1.98 percentage points over the trial). When controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances, the average SEAM effect was a reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences by 2.44 percentage points for the first year of the trial and by 0.19 percentage points over the trial, but these impact results were also not statistically significant.

One of possible reasons for the insignificant SEAM effect for SEAM students in NT DET schools is the greater heterogeneity that exists in NT DET schools. For instance, the percentage of NT DET students in scope for SEAM varied widely across nine SEAM schools, ranging from nine per cent to as high as 87 per cent. These schools are located in remote and very remote communities.

In the analysis, unauthorised absences were found to be positively correlated with age. That is, on average, the rate of unauthorised absences over the trial was higher by 3.76 percentage points for NT DET students with an additional one year in age. This result was statistically significant.

#### *SEAM students in non-government Catholic schools (NT CEO)*

For SEAM students in NT CEO schools (i.e. Catholic schools), the SEAM effect led to a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences, as shown in Table 8.2.3.

It was observed that for the first year of the trial, the average rate of unauthorised absences reduced by 1.71 percentage points for SEAM students and increased by 5.67 percentage points for comparison students, compared to the average rate in 2008. This suggests that the introduction of the trial in 2009 was likely to have led to a reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students which would otherwise have increased as seen for comparison students. Over the trial period, it was observed that the average rate of unauthorised absences was higher by 3.22 percentage points for SEAM students and by 7.37 percentage points for comparison students than in 2008. As a result, the average SEAM effect (without accounting for demographic factors and family circumstances) was a reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences by 7.38 percentage points in the first year and by 4.15 percentage points over the trial. These impact estimates were statistically significant.

When accounting for demographic characteristics and various family circumstances, the average SEAM effect was a statistically significant reduction in unauthorised absences by 8.16 percentage points in the first year of the trial and 6.09 percentage points over the trial period.

The statistically significant SEAM effect observed in NT CEO schools may be partly because the SEAM trial was implemented in a small number of homogenous NT CEO schools and it was evident from qualitative information that the largest participating NT CEO school was very supportive of SEAM. Moreover, the proportion of SEAM students in NT CEO schools who were issued with an attendance notice and also received social work support was relatively high (refer to Section 8.4.2 for detailed analysis).

The average SEAM effect was observed to be greater for the first year after the implementation than over the trial period as a whole. This observation was consistent with the qualitative evidence described in Section 8.5, where time lags in follow-up resulted in a delayed response to attendance issues. As a result, there was a view that the threat of SEAM would not be backed by action.

**Table 8.2.3: Average SEAM effect on SEAM students in Catholic schools (NT CEO)**

		first year of the trial	over the trial
Difference in average annual rate of unauthorised absences before SEAM (i.e. 2008) and on the completion of the SEAM trial	<i>SEAM students (1)</i>	-1.71%	3.22%
	<i>comparison students (2)</i>	5.67%	7.37%
average SEAM effect (unadjusted = (1)-(2))		-7.38%***	-4.15%**
average SEAM effect (adjusted for the following characteristics/factors)		-8.16%**	-6.09%**
- age		1.01%**	2.97%***
- gender		2.03%	2.79%
- Indigenous status		7.46%	9.92%
- in a persistently jobless family		0.80%	1.44%
- parent having a reported medical condition		2.34%	3.99%
- parent being in a vulnerable situation		-0.27%	-2.95%
- having a change in the child care arrangement		-3.15%	-1.79%
- having moved house		1.00%	-1.43%
- parent/caregiver deceased		3.67%	-2.41%

\*\*\*statistically significant at 1% level; \*\*statistically significant at 5% level; \*statistically significant at 10% level

Note: Approximately 1200 SEAM students were enrolled in SEAM participating NT CEO schools over the trial period.

Similar to the analysis for NT DET students, unauthorised absences of NT CEO students were also found to be positively correlated with students' age. On average, the rate of

unauthorised absences over the trial was higher by 2.97 percentage points for NT CEO students with an additional one year in age.

### **Average SEAM effect – Queensland**

In comparison to the NT results, it is evident that there was a statistically significant SEAM effect in reducing unauthorised absences for SEAM students both in Logan and remote sites in QLD.

#### *SEAM students in Logan sites*

Table 8.2.4 shows a reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students in Logan sites, by 0.25 percentage points for the first year of the trial and by 0.37 percentage points over the trial period, compared to the pre-trial year (i.e. 2008). In contrast, the average rate of unauthorised absences for comparison students was higher by 0.94 percentage points for the first year and by 0.54 percentage points over the trial period than in 2008. These findings were consistent with the trend analysis presented in Section 8.2.2.

As a result, the average SEAM effect (without accounting for demographic factors and family circumstances) was a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences by 1.20 percentage points for the first year of the trial and by 0.91 percentage points over the trial.

When controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances, the average SEAM effect (unauthorised absences reduced by 0.72 percentage points) was also found to be statistically significant for the first year of the trial, but was not statistically significant over the trial (unauthorised absences reduced by 0.43 percentage points). The insignificant impact result over the trial was likely due to the greater dispersion on the rate of unauthorised absences over the trial than in the first year of the trial.<sup>44</sup>

In the analysis, it was found that an increase in age, being identified with Indigenous status, being in a persistently jobless family, having a change in child care arrangements and having moved house over the trial period were influential factors in unauthorised absences. That is, the average rate of unauthorised absences was generally higher in the presence of these factors. For estimates that were statistically significant, for an additional one year of age, the rate of unauthorised absences was found to be higher (by 0.49 percentage points in the first year of the trial and 0.36 percentage points over the entire trial period). For the first year of the trial, the average rate of unauthorised absences was higher by 0.75 percentage points for students from a persistently jobless family, and 0.64 percentage points for those who had moved house. Over the entire trial period, SEAM students who were identified with Indigenous status had a higher rate of unauthorised absences by 0.96 percentage points. The average rate of unauthorised absences was found to be higher by 0.75 percentage points for students from a persistently jobless family, 0.89 percentage points for those having a change in their care arrangement and 0.73 percentage points for those who had moved house.

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<sup>44</sup> The impact estimates were more sensitive to sample size when broken down by various factors, which could be too small to detect statistical significance especially when the variation in the outcome of interest was large.

**Table 8.2.4: Average SEAM effect on SEAM students in Logan schools**

		first year of the trial	over the trial
Difference in average annual rate of unauthorised absences before and on the completion of the SEAM trial	<i>SEAM students (1)</i>	-0.25%	-0.37%
	<i>comparison students (2)</i>	0.94%	0.54%
average SEAM effect (unadjusted = (1)-(2))		-1.20%***	-0.91%***
average SEAM effect (adjusted for the following characteristics/factors)		-0.72%**	-0.43%
- age		0.49%***	0.36%***
- gender		-0.12%	0.13%
- Indigenous status		0.06%	0.96%*
- in a persistently jobless family		0.75%**	0.75%**
- parent having a reported medical condition		-0.33%	0.06%
- parent being in a vulnerable situation		0.28%	-0.38%
- having a change in the child care arrangement		-0.17%	0.89%**
- having moved house		0.64%*	0.73%**
- parent/caregiver deceased		2.53%	0.14%

\*\*\*statistically significant at 1% level; \*\*statistically significant at 5% level; \*statistically significant at 10% level

Note: Approximately 8000 SEAM students were enrolled in SEAM participating schools in Logan sites over the trial period.

The trend analysis in Section 8.2.2 clearly showed a different pattern in the average rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students in schools where SEAM attendance notices were issued compared with those in schools where no attendance notices were issued over the trial period. Based on this, the average SEAM effect on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences was also separately estimated for SEAM students in schools where attendance notices were or were not issued, as shown in Table 8.2.5.

For SEAM students in schools where attendance notices were issued, the rate of unauthorised absences reduced by a statistically significant 1.75 percentage points in the first year and by 1.32 percentage points over the trial period, compared to comparison students. When controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances, the SEAM effect was a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences by 1.45 percentage points in the first year and 0.94 percentage points over the trial period.

In contrast, the rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students in schools where no attendance notices were issued actually increased compared to comparison students,

although the results were not statistically significant (0.52 percentage points in the first year and 0.59 percentage points over the trial). When controlling for demographic characteristics and family circumstances, the analysis shows a statistically significant higher rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students (1.04 percentage points for the first year and 1.14 percentage points over the trial), compared to comparison students.

The analysis shows that the SEAM effect was substantial and sustained for SEAM students in SEAM schools that had used SEAM as one of their strategies (i.e. issuing SEAM attendance notices). But SEAM was unlikely to have had an impact on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students in schools which were not actively participating in SEAM (i.e. no attendance notices were issued).

**Table 8.2.5: Average SEAM effect on SEAM students in Logan schools (with and without issuing SEAM attendance notices)**

	first year of the trial	over the trial
Logan schools where SEAM attendance notices were issued (i.e. actively participating in SEAM)		
average SEAM effect (unadjusted)	-1.75%***	-1.32%***
average SEAM effect (adjusted for demographic factors and family circumstances)	-1.45%***	-0.94%**
Logan schools where no SEAM attendance notices were issued (i.e. not actively participating in SEAM)		
average SEAM effect (unadjusted)	0.52%	0.59%
average SEAM effect (adjusted for demographic factors and family circumstances)	1.04%**	1.14%**

\*\*\*statistically significant at 1% level; \*\*statistically significant at 5% level; \*statistically significant at 10% level

#### *SEAM students in QLD remote sites*

As shown in Table 8.2.6, for SEAM students in QLD remote sites, the rate of unauthorised absences reduced by 8.40 percentage points in the first year and by 5.31 percentage points over the trial, compared to the pre-trial year (i.e. 2008). For comparison students, the rate of unauthorised absences was higher by 5.14 percentage points in the first year and by 2.61 percentage points over the trial than in 2008.

As a result, the average SEAM effect on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences was statistically significant in the first year of the trial (13.54 percentage points) and over the trial period (7.92 percentage points), without controlling for demographic factors and family circumstances.

When controlling for demographic characteristics and family circumstances, the average SEAM effect was statistically significant in the first year (unauthorised absences reduced by 9.21 percentage points), but was not statistically significant over the trial period

(unauthorised absences reduced by 1.11 percentage points). The insignificant impact result over the trial was likely due to the greater dispersion on the rate of unauthorised absences over the trial than in the first year of the trial.<sup>37</sup>

**Table 8.2.6: Average SEAM effect on SEAM students in QLD schools, remote sites**

		first year of the trial	over the trial
Difference in average annual rate of unauthorised absences before and on the completion of the SEAM trial	<i>SEAM students (1)</i>	-8.40%	-5.31%
	<i>comparison students (2)</i>	5.14%	2.61%
average SEAM effect (unadjusted = (1)-(2))		-13.54%***	-7.92%***
average SEAM effect (adjusted for the following characteristics/factors)		-9.21%**	-1.11%
- age		0.64%	1.20%*
- gender		0.82%	-0.14%
- Indigenous status		-2.77%	-7.22%
- in a persistently jobless family		1.80%	-0.36%
- parent having a reported medical condition		-3.26%	-6.56%
- parent being in a vulnerable situation		2.04%	4.38%
- having a change in the child care arrangement		4.79%	6.16%*
- having moved house		5.21%	8.31%**
- parent/caregiver deceased		-	0.14%

\*\*\*statistically significant at 1% level; \*\*statistically significant at 5% level; \*statistically significant at 10% level

Note: Approximately 730 SEAM students were enrolled in SEAM participating schools in QLD remote sites over the trial period.

In the analysis, the rate of unauthorised absences was found to be generally higher with age, while family circumstances such as having a change in child care arrangements and having moved houses were also influential on the rate of unauthorised absences. Statistically significant results indicated that, over the trial period, unauthorised absences were higher:

- by 1.20 percentage points with an additional one year of age
- by 6.16 percentage points when there was a change in the child care arrangement
- by 8.31 percentage points for students who had moved house.

The extent of the average SEAM effect appeared to be larger in remote sites than in suburban sites such as Logan, with more reduction in unauthorised absences being observed



for SEAM students in remote sites. This is likely related to a much higher rate of unauthorised absences in remote sites which presents more potential for improvement.

The findings from the impact analysis are generally consistent with the trend analysis presented in Section 8.2.2. Given the overall average effect was greater in the first year of the trial when there were fewer cases of payment suspensions, this may suggest that the effect was most likely due to the threat of suspension.

### SEAM effect and family circumstances

In the previous section, the impact analysis was conducted to assess the average SEAM effect across all SEAM students in the NT and QLD sites, and various family circumstances were also taken into consideration.

In addition to the average SEAM effect across all students, of interest is whether SEAM students experiencing different family circumstances may respond differently to the trial. In this section, the impact analysis was conducted to assess if the average SEAM effect across SEAM students who experienced a particular family circumstance was different to those who did not experience such a circumstance.

**Table 8.2.7: Average SEAM effect related to family circumstances, NT sites**

<i>Average SEAM effect related to a particular family circumstance</i>	first year of the trial	over the trial
SEAM students in government schools (NT DET)		
in a persistently jobless family	0.70%	-2.87%
parent having a reported medical condition	-5.47%*	-7.13%**
parent being in a vulnerable situation	-7.00%**	-5.28%*
having a change in the child care arrangement	4.72%	0.39%
having moved house	-3.85%	-1.13%
SEAM students in non-government schools (NT CEO)		
in a persistently jobless family	-5.33%	-4.44%
parent having a reported medical condition	-1.08%	4.40%
parent being in a vulnerable situation	0.27%	2.80%
Having a change in the child care arrangement	0.92%	2.61%
Having moved house	-0.37%	1.74%

\*\*\*statistically significant at 1% level; \*\*statistically significant at 5% level; \*statistically significant at 10% level

As shown in Table 8.2.7 and 8.2.8, the average SEAM effect was found to be statistically significant for students from families ever reporting medical conditions or from families ever reporting to be in a vulnerable situation, as supported by the following observations:

- SEAM students in NT DET schools who were from families ever reporting medical conditions for assessment showed a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences by 5.47 percentage points in the first year and 7.13 percentage points over the trial period, compared to comparison students. Similarly for SEAM students in QLD Logan sites, the reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was statistically significant for those whose parent reported having a medical condition (by 1.02 percentage points in the first year).
- SEAM students in NT DET schools who were from families ever reporting to be in a vulnerable situation experienced a statistically significant reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences by 7.00 percentage points in the first year and 5.28 percentage points over the trial period, compared to comparison students. For SEAM students in a similar family circumstance in QLD Logan sites, the reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was observed to be statistically significant by 1.04 percentage points in the first year and over the trial period.

**Table 8.2.8: Average SEAM effect related to family circumstances, QLD sites**

<i>Average SEAM effect related to a particular family circumstance</i>	first year of the trial	over the trial
SEAM students in Logan sites		
in a persistently jobless family	0.84%	1.28%*
parent having a reported medical condition	-1.02%*	-0.57%
parent being in a vulnerable situation	-1.04%*	-1.04%*
having a change in the child care arrangement	-0.40%	-0.97%
having moved house	-0.09%	-0.28%
SEAM students in remote sites		
in a persistently jobless family	4.25%	0.12%
parent having a reported medical condition	2.02%	3.33%
parent being in a vulnerable situation	-3.10%	-3.10%
Having a change in the child care arrangement	-4.37%	7.65%
Having moved house	4.31%	5.64%

\*\*\*statistically significant at 1% level; \*\*statistically significant at 5% level; \*statistically significant at 10% level

For SEAM students from a jobless family in Logan sites, the rate of unauthorised absences was statistically significantly higher over the entire trial, compared to comparison group. This indicates that on average, the average SEAM effect was not necessarily different for students from a persistently jobless family.

Overall, these results suggested that for those with broad vulnerabilities, SEAM seemed to have had a positive impact, compared to the non-SEAM comparison group and this may have been the result of additional social work support provided under SEAM.

#### 8.2.4. Post SEAM trial analysis

The post SEAM trial analysis is to assess if the reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences (if any) was sustained after the conclusion of the trial. Absence data for an extra semester after the SEAM trial (i.e. the second semester in 2012) was available for the analysis. As found in the trend analysis in Section 8.2.2, there was generally a distinguishable pattern of unauthorised absences which tended to be higher in the second semester than in the first semester.

Given the available data, the post-trial analysis focuses on examining (1) the difference in the average rate of unauthorised absences in the second semester in 2009 compared to the second semester in 2008 (i.e. pre SEAM), and (2) the difference in the average rate of unauthorised absences in the second semester in 2012 (i.e. post SEAM) compared to the second semester in 2008 (i.e. pre SEAM). These comparisons were made separately for SEAM and comparison students.

Due to the short window for the post SEAM trial analysis (i.e. only using one semester of attendance data), the findings on the potential post SEAM effect should be considered as indicative only, and the results should be treated with caution, i.e. no conclusions can be drawn on whether SEAM has had a sustained impact or not.

#### **Northern Territory**

For SEAM students in NT DET schools, as no statistically significant SEAM effect was detected in the impact analysis, particular caution should be taken when considering the post-trial analysis. As shown in Table 8.2.9, the change in the rate of unauthorised absences for NT DET students between post and pre SEAM was similar among SEAM and comparison students.

For SEAM students in NT CEO schools, unauthorised absences reduced at a higher rate for SEAM students (3.79 per cent) than for comparison students (1.66 per cent) when comparing the average rate of unauthorised absence for the second semester in 2009 with that in the second semester in 2008. This result was consistent with the finding in the impact analysis as discussed in the previous section (Section 8.2.3). The post and pre SEAM comparison (i.e. the second semester in 2012 compared to 2008), however, shows that the rate of unauthorised absences was substantially higher for SEAM students (10.2 per cent) than for comparison students (3.38 per cent). This seems to indicate that the SEAM effect was unlikely to have been sustained.

**Table 8.2.9: Comparison of unauthorised absence rates of second semesters during trial and post-trial to that of pre SEAM trial, NT sites**

<i>Change in the average rate of unauthorised absences</i>	<i>SEAM students</i>	<i>Comparison students</i>
SEAM students in government schools (NT DET)		
(1) 2nd semester in 2009 (the first year of SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	-3.61%	-5.35%
(2) 2nd semester in 2012 (post SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	10.66%	9.35%
SEAM students in non-government schools (NT CEO)		
(1) 2nd semester in 2009 (the first year of SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	-3.79%	-1.66%
(2) 2nd semester in 2012 (post SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	10.20%	3.38%

### Queensland

As shown in Table 8.2.10, in QLD Logan sites, the reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was higher for SEAM students (0.48 per cent) than for comparison students (0.16 per cent) between the second semester in 2008 (pre SEAM) and that in 2009. This result was consistent with the finding in the impact analysis in Section 8.2.3. When comparing the rate of unauthorised absences post SEAM to that of the pre SEAM period, the reduction in rate of unauthorised absences was similar for SEAM and comparison students (1.20 per cent versus 1.04 per cent).

**Table 8.2.10: Comparison of unauthorised absence rates of second semesters during trial and post-trial to that of pre SEAM trial, QLD sites**

<i>Change in the average rate of unauthorised absences</i>	<i>SEAM students</i>	<i>Comparison students</i>
SEAM students in Logan sites		
(1) 2nd semester in 2009 (the first year of SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	-0.48%	-0.16%
(2) 2nd semester in 2012 (post SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	-1.20%	-1.04%
SEAM students in QLD remote sites		
(1) 2nd semester in 2009 (the first year of SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	-5.21%	0.00%
(2) 2nd semester in 2012 (post SEAM) compared to that in 2008 (pre SEAM)	-10.45%	-3.28%

For SEAM students in QLD remote sites, consistent with the finding from the impact analysis, a substantial reduction in the rate of unauthorised absences was seen for SEAM students (5.21 per cent) compared to comparison students (3.28 per cent) between the second semester in 2008 and that in 2009. The post and pre SEAM comparison shows that the rate of unauthorised absences reduced at a higher rate for SEAM students (10.45 per cent) than for comparison students (3.28 per cent).

These observations suggest that the SEAM effect was likely to have been sustained over the semester after the end of the SEAM trial in both QLD Logan and remote sites.

### **8.3. Threat effect of the SEAM trial**

As shown in the analysis in Section 8.2, the impact of the trial was most likely attributable to the threat effect of the trial. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis described in the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial (Section 3).

The threat effect of the SEAM trial, in some cases, was sufficient to ensure the potential attendance problems were avoided. Qualitative evidence showed that the threat effect took place at different stages of the SEAM process.

This section provides views and feedback on the threat effect of the SEAM trial, from the perspective of parents, schools and DHS social workers.

#### **8.3.1. Parents' view on SEAM requirements**

As part of the qualitative research to assist in understanding parents' views on their child's schooling, a telephone interview<sup>45</sup> with selected SEAM parents was conducted by the SRC in 2010 to collect relevant information. As reported in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, it was found that, of those parents who had heard about the trial prior to implementation, almost half reported that implementation had made them think about the importance of their child's schooling. A further 29 per cent also noted the trial had encouraged them to make more effort to address their child's attendance issues.

An internal analysis of the SRC survey also found that a large majority of parents being interviewed reported that they would be committed to try harder to send their child to school as a result of the SEAM trial. In particular, parents of children with serious absenteeism were considerably more likely to indicate that they would make their children go to school more regularly if income support payments were suspended. Some parents in the study also reported that they had directly used the threat of income support payment suspension to 'encourage' their children to attend school more regularly. Such a response from parents who were subject to SEAM suggested that the threat effect had properly targeted the issue.

#### **8.3.2. Schools' feedback on the threat effect**

In the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork, school principals and staff of selected SEAM schools in the NT and QLD sites were interviewed to provide their feedback on the SEAM trial. It was noted by most school principals and staff interviewed that the threat of income support payment suspensions had the biggest impact, and the threat occurred at various stages in the SEAM process.

Interviewed principals in QLD Logan sites reported that the threat effect firstly occurred when the SEAM trial was reported on in local papers, the school newsletter, or when parents became aware of the trial at public meetings on the commencement of the trial. Interviewed principals in NT sites noted that it was initially evident that families, in particular those with

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<sup>45</sup> The telephone interview was conducted in 2010 by the Social Research Centre (SRC) and the analysis using the survey data was undertaken internally by the SEAM evaluation team.

chronic attendance problems, responded to the SEAM message by making more effort to send their children to school.

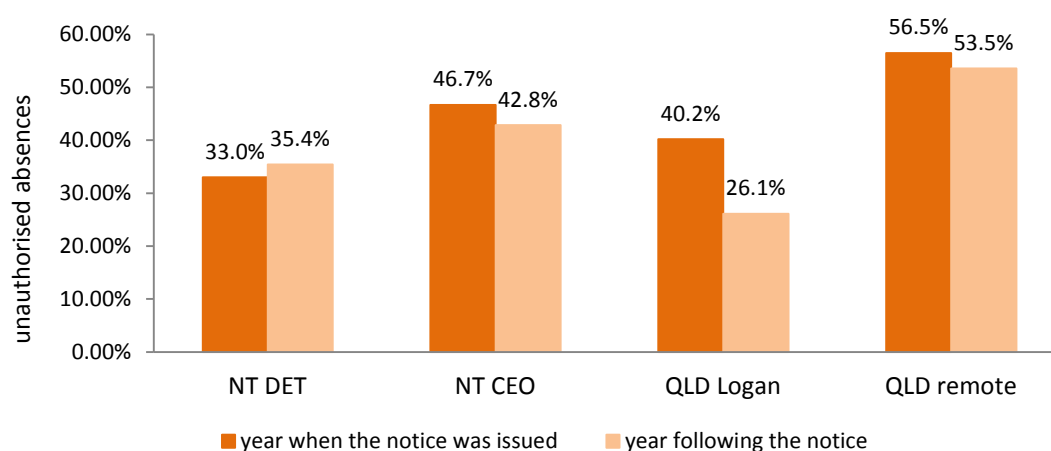
In QLD, school principals indicated that the first step in the process to address attendance issues was to send a school-based letter with the SEAM flyer to parents. Principals noted that SEAM notification letters were only sent after all other school-based approaches were exhausted. Schools indicated that it was evident that the SEAM notification letter prompted parents to focus on SEAM requirements. That is, if parents did not fulfil their responsibility for their child’s attendance, there would be consequences (suspension of income support payments). The threat effect, in many cases, was believed to have prevented attendance problems re-occurring.

In the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork, several examples in QLD were given by school principals on the success of the SEAM letter as a ‘threat effect’. In one case, the attendance of one SEAM child had improved and been sustained. The parent had also become strongly engaged with the school to support improving attendance. Similarly, school principals in NT sites reported that SEAM messages did have an impact on parents ‘... who started thinking I must send my child to school’ to avoid any punitive action. One school principal interviewed noted one case where the attendance of a child improved after the school attendance officer made a home visit and informed the parents of SEAM attendance requirements. Principals and school staff in NT sites also indicated that the threat of suspension had played a role in reducing absences, especially after the first suspension had occurred. In addition, some parents were unaware that the trial ceased in mid-2012 and some school staff in QLD noted that the threat of SEAM continued to have an effect.

### 8.3.3. Issuing attendance notices and the threat effect

As reported in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork, the threat effect occurred when parents were issued with an attendance notice. As a result, parents may have been motivated to make efforts to address the attendance issue of their school-age child. In Figure 8.3.1, the average rate of unauthorised absences was compared for the year when the notice was issued and the following year for those who were ever issued with an attendance notice.

**Figure 8.3.1: Average rate of unauthorised absences with the notice being issued**



For SEAM students from NT DET schools, the unauthorised absence rate in the year when the notice was issued was lower than in the year following issuing the notice. For SEAM

students from NT CEO schools, however, a reduced rate of unauthorised absences was observed in the year following the notice being issued compared to the year the notice was issued. A similar result to NT CEO students was observed for SEAM students in QLD sites.

This observation is consistent with the results from the impact analysis (Section 8.2.3), where a statistical significant effect of the SEAM trial on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences was detected for SEAM students in NT CEO schools and QLD schools. This confirms that the threat effect of issuing attendance notices had an impact on reducing unauthorised absences. This impact, however, was not observed for SEAM students in NT DET schools, and the result was possibly related to the greater heterogeneity that existed in NT DET SEAM schools as previously explained in Section 8.2.3 (page 61).



#### **8.4. Effect of social work contact under SEAM**

Social work contact provided by DHS was a key feature of the SEAM trial. The provision of support services was consistent with the principle that suspension should never occur under SEAM without proper assessment and understanding of family circumstances and before support is put in place.

Under SEAM, DHS social workers were required to contact parents, who received an attendance notice within seven business days. When contact was made, assistance, referrals to other services and further contact was provided, if necessary and feasible, to help notified families overcome attendance barriers and comply with SEAM requirements.

In some cases, however, social work contact under SEAM may not have occurred, because social workers could have been unsuccessful in making contact for a variety of reasons, or affected DHS customers were able to decline the offer of the DHS social work support if they decided not to use the service.

In this section, the significance and level of social work contact is firstly examined, based on feedback from qualitative data. Secondly, findings from the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report are presented on the effect of social work contact on reducing unauthorised absences for referred students. Then analysis using information from the Social Work Information System (SWIS) is undertaken to identify barriers and issues related to the support services. Lastly, qualitative information from interviewed schools and DHS social workers is used to further assess the effect of social work contact in the SEAM process.

##### **8.4.1. Significance of social work contact**

In the 2011 internal process review, the social work contact provided under SEAM was reported as critical and intensive by DHS social workers and education authorities involved in the SEAM trial.

It was noted by interviewed social workers that the DHS social work contact provided under SEAM resulted in increased engagement by families who would normally avoid contact with services or may not come to the attention of social workers. As there are no reporting requirements under some DHS income support payments, SEAM was acting as a trigger for social work contact with families which may not have occurred otherwise.

Given the potential punitive action under SEAM, the social work contact was critical in supporting referred families, especially in remote communities where families may not understand SEAM requirements and may face complex barriers to comply with SEAM. Social work contact was also used as a tool for referral to further support services (where they were available in the community), particularly during periods of suspension. Families could be referred on to mental health services, material aid and emergency assistance for such things as housing. In some incidences, the role of a social worker was to advocate on behalf of families at risk of having income support payments suspended, which may have included granting special circumstance exemptions or reasonable excuses to allow an extended compliance period. Therefore, it was possible that social work contact was the reason why only a limited number of cases had reached the point of suspension. The support provided

by DHS social workers under SEAM highlights that the focus of the measure is supporting families through the provision of assistance rather than taking a simplistic punitive approach.

SEAM was also noted by interviewed social workers as facilitating increased engagement with schools and wider communities through social work contact. While the school had primary responsibility to address enrolment and attendance issues, social work contact under SEAM was designed to provide an extra resource to support schools' work and at times, facilitate communication between families and schools. By recognising the importance of engaging with communities, some DHS social workers also reached out to the wider community and spread the SEAM message. It was believed by social workers that an attitude change in the community would have the biggest impact on the effectiveness of the measure in the longer term.

#### 8.4.2. Level and adequacy of social work contact

Over the trial period, 855 attendance notices were issued to 395 parents with regard to 617 SEAM students in the NT, and 204 attendance notices were issued to 127 parents with regard to 175 SEAM students in QLD. As shown in Table 8.4.1, NT CEO students who were issued with an attendance notice had the highest proportion (69.4 per cent) whose parents receiving social work contact. Just over half of NT DET students and around one-third of QLD students who were issued with an attendance notice whose parents received social work contact. Overall, across all NT and QLD sites, there were 57.4 per cent of referred students whose parents actually received social work contact.

Conversely, there were over two thirds of referred students in QLD whose parents were not contacted by DHS social workers, compared to just over one-third in the NT. In the NT, due to the automatic referral model, the non-contact may be an indication of unsuccessful contacts or difficulty in reaching out to some remote communities within the required timeframe.

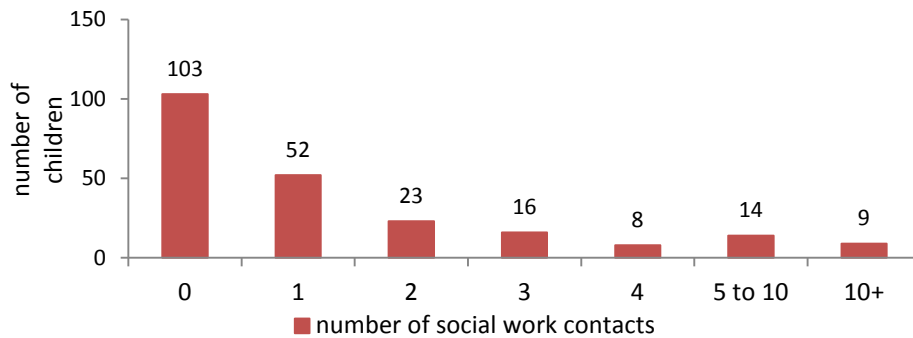
**Table 8.4.1: Proportion of referred students whose parents received social work contact**

<i>SEAM sites</i>	<i>referred students</i>	<i>social work contact</i>	
	(total)(1)	(total)(2)	(proportion)(3=2/1)
NT sites – DET schools	220	122	55.5%
NT sites – CEO schools	397	276	69.4%
QLD Logan sites	64	24	37.5%
QLD remote sites	111	33	29.7%
total	792	455	57.4%

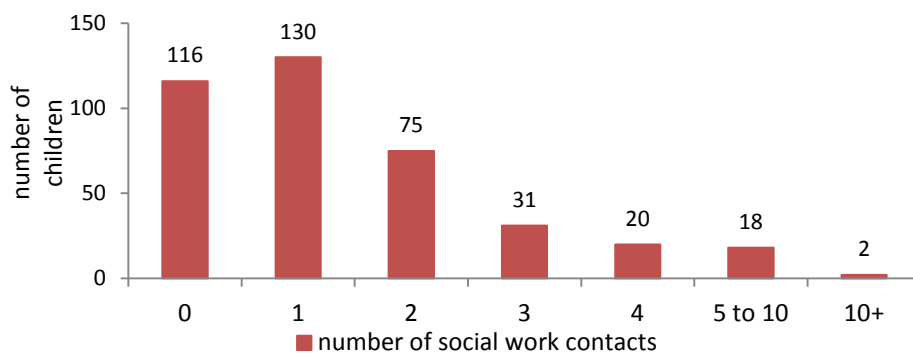
The distribution of students who were sent an attendance notice by whether their parents received social work contact in NT DET and NT CEO, and QLD SEAM schools is presented in Figure 8.4.1-8.4.3. Note that similar analysis was presented in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation

Report which included the relevant data up to 2010. The distributions presented in this report use the entire trial data and are similar to results in the 2010 report except that there were a much greater proportion of referred students in NT CEO schools whose parents were contacted at least once by DHS social workers post 2010. Consistent with the finding in the trend analysis (Figure 8.2.4) where there was a marked reduction in the average rate of unauthorised absences for SEAM students in NT CEO schools in 2011, this result indicates the SEAM effect was substantial when a high level of social work support was provided.

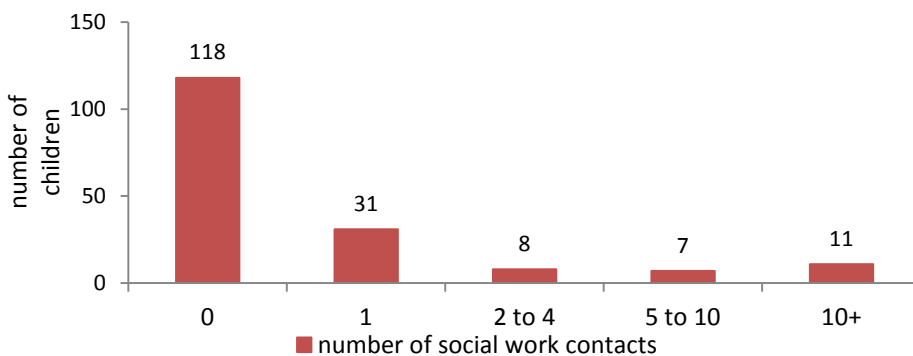
**Figure 8.4.1: Distribution of social work contacts among referred SEAM students in NT DET schools**



**Figure 8.4.2: Distribution of social work contacts among referred SEAM students in NT CEO schools**



**Figure 8.4.3: Distribution of social work contacts among referred SEAM students in QLD schools**



It was also found that nearly half of the social work contact only occurred once among referred students in both the NT and QLD. Given that there were substantially more students in scope for SEAM from QLD schools than from NT schools, it appeared that relatively more resources were directed to NT students in providing social work contact. This may partially be related to the automatic referral model implemented in the NT which

resulted in more students being referred. Among referred students whose parents were contacted by social workers, however, proportionally there were more QLD students whose parents received more frequent contacts (over 10 times) from social workers, compared to all NT students, suggesting that the social work service under the QLD referral model was more intensive and may have been more targeted towards complex cases.

Where there was only one contact, DHS social workers reported that it was evident that in both the NT and QLD sites, when parents received their notice letter and had an initial contact with the social worker to explore the implications of SEAM, many parents appeared to quickly address the child's schooling issues to avoid being at risk of having their payments suspended. In some cases, however, reasons for only one contact were related to different community environments and attendance referral models operating in the NT and QLD. In the NT, inability to contact the parent again or parents moving out of the trial site after the initial contact resulted in no follow-up taking place. For example, in Wadeye social workers were often dependent on the parent attending the service centre for follow-up contact. In QLD, particularly in remote communities, it was noted by DHS social workers that parents would likely ensure their children's school attendance when they knew that the DHS remote servicing was coming to their community. DHS social workers were sometimes unable to engage with parents at the school after the first contact and when third parties (usually schools) were required to facilitate follow-up meetings.

Some DHS social workers interviewed raised concerns that the amount of support required by referred families was not fully resourced under SEAM. It was noted that social work support was being extended to families beyond compliance periods, and even to families who moved out of scope of SEAM. It was apparent that some families required intensive assistance addressing barriers that could not be resolved within the compliance period. It was noted, however, that families were receiving more support under SEAM than they would otherwise.

#### 8.4.3. Patterns of unauthorised absences for referred students whose parents received social work contact

In the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, it was found that social work contact was more likely to be provided to parents of students who had a higher rate of unauthorised absences. During the compliance period, there was a marked reduction in unauthorised absences for all referred students in both NT and QLD sites. The reduction was more substantial for students whose parents received social work contact than those without social work contact.

For the two months post compliance period, however, the relapse in unauthorised absences was observed for all referred students. It was found that the relapse occurred to a lesser extent for NT DET and QLD referred students whose parents received social work contact than for those without such contact. A reverse pattern was identified for NT CEO students where referred students whose parents received social work contacts experienced more relapse in unauthorised absences than those without social work contact.

For more details, refer to Section 6.3.3 in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report.

#### 8.4.4. Analysis of SWIS information (NT and QLD)

The Social Work Information System (SWIS) managed by the Department of Human Services (DHS) captures detailed information on types of contact provided by social workers under SEAM and interventions put in place to address the barriers affecting school attendance. By making use of the case information obtained from SWIS, qualitative analysis has provided insights on the complexity of family circumstances and the challenges social workers had encountered in assisting parents or caregivers who had difficulty in complying with SEAM requirements.

When a DHS customer subject to SEAM was identified with education (school attendance) issues after the SEAM referral, a referral was made to the DHS social worker to follow up with the case. The first step undertaken by the social worker was to make a file assessment to understand the family circumstance and related barriers through telephone interviews or social work contacts. At the first visit/interview, the social worker often provided the customer with information about SEAM requirements and raised awareness of the importance of a parent's or caregiver's responsibility to have their school-age children attending school and the positive impact regular attendance would have on children and the family. The early stage of social work contact had a focus on building a good rapport and engaging with the customer. A wellbeing check for the customer was usually conducted, and where needed, the customer would be linked with a support service if that was available.

The social worker also conducted case consultations with third parties (including the school) to explore options and discuss strategies in assisting the customer and children. A strength-based approach<sup>46</sup> was applied to affirm the small successful steps in dealing with the attendance issues. In most cases, customers involved were motivated to make efforts in improving their child's school attendance.

Referred families who received multiple social work contacts, however, generally experienced complex barriers in complying with SEAM obligations. Broadly, there are parent or caregiver related barriers and child related barriers, as shown in Table 8.4.2. Note that the list of barriers is based on the SWIS information and is not an exhaustive list.

In addressing these barriers, DHS social workers introduced a range of intervention strategies to motivate and assist the customer in taking responsibility for their child's wellbeing including attending school regularly. This included helping the customer to identify priorities in life and assisting with transport getting to and from school. In situations where barriers were clearly identified, the social worker may have recommended a reasonable excuse period or determined that special circumstances be considered and grant the customer extended time to manage pressures and address issues.

The social worker also played a critical role in maintaining positive relationships with the family and the school, as well as facilitating effective communication between all parties. Wherever possible, further referral was made for the customer to receive support, such as

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<sup>46</sup> A strength-based approach in social work support focuses on encouraging change in behaviour by targeting people's strengths, based on which improvements could possibly be made gradually leading to a more permanent positive outcome over time.

intensive family support services, parenting skill support programmes, psychologist services and disability services.

**Table 8.4.2: Some barriers SEAM families experienced**

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*Parent/caregiver-related barriers*

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- Family crisis, including relationship breakdown, domestic and family violence and unresolved grief and loss issues
  - Financial, housing and cultural obligations with family, e.g. attending funerals or relative frequently staying in the family home
  - Lack of support network and limited support from partner
  - Financial stress, e.g. no power card to provide electricity supply, no phone credit to make contacts, or unable to meet the cost of school excursions or uniforms
  - Difficulty in accessing transportation
  - Own medical conditions (including mental health issue) and family health issues
  - Poor parental skills, budgeting and money management
- 

*Child-related barriers*

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- Behaviour issues including verbal and physical attacks towards parent, fighting at school, chronic shyness
  - Health issues related to injuries, illness and impairment, emotional instability at times and feelings of insecurity
  - Peer influence e.g. cousins residing in the same house were not attending school
  - Unwilling to attend school for reasons such as being bullied at school, having learning difficulties
  - Constant movement between parent's home and extended family homes due to the child's lifestyle choice where the parent may struggle to gain a degree of control
- 

Based on the SWIS case information, two case studies (in Boxes 8.4.1 and 8.4.2) prepared by DHS social workers illustrate the complexity of family circumstances and the outcome of social work interventions.

**Box 8.4.1: Case study on social work contact under SEAM, remote site, NT**

The DHS customer subject to SEAM was first referred under SEAM in October 2009. The social workers conducted a social work contact and communicated with the customer about the importance of school attendance and SEAM requirements. Several follow-up contacts by social workers continued to encourage school attendance, including undertaking a wellbeing check, counselling and support to the customer to handle a family crisis. Social workers also made contact with the school on behalf of the customer to facilitate communication between the customer and the school and to provide advocacy during a stressful period for the family. The customer appeared to be willing to be engaged with social work support and sought assistance when needed. Improved school attendance was observed, and social workers made use of a strengths-based approach to encourage ongoing school attendance and reinforce the positive changes the customer had made.

The customer was referred under SEAM for the second time in May 2010. The social work contact identified barriers affecting school attendance, including health issues, transport issues, extended family pressure, limited support from partner, and financial issues. Social workers acknowledged the customer's resources to manage various barriers for her children's school attendance, and the customer demonstrated improved acceptance that it was her responsibility to get children to school. Several social work contacts and an interview at the DHS Service Centre were conducted by social workers to continue engaging with the customer. Social workers assisted the customer with developing strategies that would ensure school attendance and help with managing and containing periods of crisis. Social workers also recommended that the customer keep the school informed about the children's absence and seek assistance from local health and housing services when needed. The customer advised that she was trying to restore order in the household, that she understood the importance of education and was working towards ensuring that her children had the best chance in life. There was evidence of improved school attendance.

The customer was again referred under SEAM in June 2010 due to ongoing difficulties with one of her children. This time, barriers were identified where her partner's serious and unexpected medical condition had affected her ability to meet SEAM requirements. Effective crisis intervention assistance was put in place by social workers and a special circumstance exemption was granted for a temporary period. The school was also advised about the family crisis, and provided assistance on transport to school while the customer was away to care for her partner. It was noted that the customer was placing high priority on the children's school attendance whilst managing a comprehensive family crisis situation. At the time of the family crisis, social workers also consulted with the DHS Service Centre to ensure that the correct income support entitlements were provided given the change in care arrangement for the children, and the whole family was supported to meet the children's health and education needs as well as SEAM requirements. The strength-based approach by social workers had encouraged the customer's inner strength and resilience during times of multiple difficulties. The customer was also referred to the '...local money management service' to get financial assistance to be able to pay for the phone credits and to meet the cost of uniforms, school excursions and the school nutrition programme. In September 2010, SWIS reports showed that there was evidence of increased efforts by the customer to improve the family circumstances and ensure children's wellbeing including uninterrupted schooling.

#### **Box 8.4.2: Case study on social work contact under SEAM, suburban site, QLD**

The DHS customer subject to SEAM was first referred under SEAM in November 2009. The social worker made contact and communicated with the customer about school attendance requirements and offered social work support. After becoming aware of the SEAM requirements, the customer acknowledged the school attendance problem related to behavioural issues of her child, and was willing to engage with the social worker and accept an offer for ongoing counselling and support. The customer attended a meeting with the school to discuss children's timetables and how to improve their school attendance. The social worker made an assessment of the family circumstances and arranged an appointment for the customer and her children with a local health care provider for assessment and further assistance.

The social worker continued to make contact with the customer and her children in the new school year. Both children expressed enthusiasm about returning to school and were motivated to complete school and work towards their future careers. The customer reported that both children attended the first day of school, and she was also about to commence her studies. During the school term, one of the children was suspended twice from school due to using offensive language, and the family felt they were being treated unfairly by the school. Through multiple contacts, the social worker re-engaged the customer with the school, and liaised with the school on the customer's behalf. This included arranging homework for the child during the suspension period, and arranging a school meeting for the customer to discuss the children's re-engagement and future attendance. As a result, the school agreed on a flexible time table and the child was to recommence school attendance soon after.

The social worker continued to provide support, in particular, to assist with improving the customer's relationship with the school and seeking clarification from the school about their expectation of the customer. The school advised that they wanted to see positive change over the following 2 months; otherwise, they might request suspension of the customer's payments. At the same time, the customer was experiencing a great deal of stress, and reported difficulties with managing her children's behaviour and engaging with the school. This resulted in a number of incidences which escalated to a communication breakdown and a crisis situation. The social worker recommended a determination of special circumstances being granted to provide the customer with time to be supported and to explore alternative options for her children's school attendance.

The social worker regularly consulted with local support services to address the complex family issues, including discussing appropriate schooling for the children. The strength-based approach was supporting the successful steps made in managing the children's behaviour and supporting school attendance. The social work assistance continued to be available to the customer and her family until the SEAM customer moved out of the SEAM trial.

Additional case studies compiled from SWIS information are presented at [Appendix 18](#).

#### **8.4.5. Interactions between DHS social workers and SEAM schools**

DHS social workers under SEAM and SEAM schools are two key stakeholder groups that drove implementation of the SEAM trial. In this section, additional qualitative information



collected from the 2011 SEAM process review and the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork are used to describe the effectiveness of interactions between social workers and participating schools<sup>47</sup>.

### Schools' feedback on its interaction with DHS social workers

The following feedback from schools is based on qualitative information collected from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork.

#### **Northern Territory**

In the NT, it was widely acknowledged by the interviewed SEAM schools that a good rapport with the DHS social worker was essential for a collaborative working relationship. During the trial, the staff turnover of DHS social workers was high: one school reported being approached by six different DHS social workers over the first two years of the trial. It was noted by a SEAM school in a remote location that the social work support was provided in a remote servicing model and only one social worker visited the school more than once. It was often the case that the school invested a substantial amount of extra effort in directly introducing social workers to families. It was reported, however, that these direct introductions could not continue with the constant turnover of social workers. In some cases, the way different social workers consulted with the school was also inconsistent.

In one case, the interviewed school staff indicated that the school experienced a good working relationship with the DHS social worker provided under SEAM. The school felt that the social worker involved in implementing SEAM understood the local environment and made efforts to implement SEAM in a caring way through working closely with the school and discussing individual cases. This resulted in the school providing the DHS social worker with feedback on the reasonable steps taken by parents, and the school was informed of any SEAM actions taken by DHS. But the interaction abruptly ceased and the school was not informed on the reasons why.

For the most part, school feedback indicated that interactions between schools and social workers were ineffective, due to the lack of transparency in communication<sup>48</sup> and timely decisions to prompt SEAM action. Issues noted by interviewed schools on communication include:

- There was a lack of reporting on social work support under SEAM. In particular, schools were not aware of when and how the social work support was provided, including when SEAM notices were sent to families and visits were made by DHS social workers.
- Since the school was not informed of any actions taken by the DHS social worker such as speaking to the family or issuing a notice, this potentially placed the school attendance officers at risk when they did home visits without knowing the situation.

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<sup>47</sup> Privacy considerations affected what information social workers could disclose to schools.

<sup>48</sup> As mentioned in Section 6.2, the communication issue in the NT was related to the communication arrangement between DHS and the NT DET that DHS was generally required to communicate SEAM related issues through the NT DET. As a result, it was not possible for DHS to directly communicate with schools.

In some cases, affected parents had shown aggression to school frontline officers at the time of home visits.

- The school felt it was a one-way communication channel with the DHS social workers, i.e. communication only occurred when the social worker rang the school to ask for information, and some schools noted that it was not possible for the school to proactively approach the social worker to work together.
- One school felt it was important, but difficult, to get everyone (including the school principal, the NT truancy officer, and DHS social worker) to meet together on a regular basis to work out the appropriate SEAM actions for individual cases in an effective and timely manner. This was because the DHS social worker and the NT truancy officer usually came to visit the school in different weeks.

From the school's perspective, it was equipped with the local knowledge and generally had built a good rapport with families over time; therefore it was well placed to provide context on attendance issues. The SEAM intervention meant that social workers replaced direct school contact with some families<sup>49</sup>. As a result, the school lost the initial and important on-going contact. When DHS social worker contact resulted in no impact on attendance, the school had to direct additional resources to re-build the relationship and re-engage with the family, i.e. SEAM may result in a discontinuity between the school and the family. Confounding situations arose when the information provided to the social worker was told about the family circumstance affecting a child's attendance was different to what the school understood and knew of the family. The lack of streamlined coordination between the social worker and the school created inconsistency in how families were approached; hence increasing the complexity for the school in dealing with the issue.

### **Queensland**

Schools interviewed in QLD Logan sites generally had a positive view of social work contact provided by DHS under SEAM, as social work support was considered to be an additional resource to assist the school in addressing enrolment and attendance issues.

One school described that it had worked in partnership with DHS social workers. It was noted that, under the SEAM model, it worked well for the school to approach attendance issues from the student's perspective and for the social worker to approach these issues from the parent's perspective. For example, one of the DHS social workers spent a lot of time in one SEAM family's home, setting up a check-list covering what needed to be done in the morning by the parents, and in what order, to get their children to school on time. The school had appreciated the efforts of the DHS social worker since it would not have been possible for the school to have such direct contact with the family due to resource constraints. With the social work contact a built-in feature of SEAM, one school felt it had sent a strong message to parents that it was a supportive approach rather than a punitive strategy. It was reported by the school that SEAM had brought the school and social work support together to help the family ensure school attendance.

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<sup>49</sup> Such a situation was, to a large extent, related to the communication arrangement, as described below in Footnote 51.

It was also noted that the DHS social workers always communicated with the school and shared information, which from the school's perspective had not happened with previous social work contact provided by other agencies. The approach by DHS social workers was a lot more seamless when it came to collaboration among various agencies involved to assist with solving attendance related problems. In some cases, it was reported that the school accompanied social workers to facilitate a joint social work contact.

An issue raised by one interviewed school was around the concept of 'reasonable steps' taken by parents. 'Reasonable Steps' was at times defined in a very different way by the school and by DHS social workers<sup>50</sup>. Discrepancies arose where the school applied more stringent criteria on what was regarded as 'reasonable steps'. The underlying issue is the subjectivity associated with the SEAM assessment and how to balance stakeholder views with the guidelines and legislation in making SEAM related decisions. The SEAM model was designed to allow social workers to make recommendations on issuing notices or payment suspensions while the final decision rested with DHS. DHS could only apply special circumstances in line with the legislative Determination and DEEWR guidelines. Some schools noted that social workers had a different perspective on support and tended to be more lenient, and the school was almost excluded in the decision-making process regarding SEAM actions. It was raised by the school that an equal partnership would have been better under SEAM in determining any actions such as issuing a notice or payment suspension<sup>51</sup>.

#### *Social workers' feedback on their interaction with schools*

The following DHS social workers' feedback was based on the qualitative information collected in the 2011 SEAM process review.

#### **Northern Territory**

The way social workers approached and interacted with schools in the NT varied depending on the community environment and the requirement of the referral process. Social workers were advised that all attendance information had to go through the state/territory education departments. As part of the procedure, the information collected by social workers regarding parents taking reasonable steps was provided by the state/territory education officer (who received the data from school principals) which was then forwarded to DHS. It was noted that the data exchange process was time-consuming, which often caused a delay in making a SEAM related decision including lifting the suspension.

The feedback in the process review by social workers, however, was not consistent in how they interacted with schools. In some cases, it was reported that, there was a perceived rule that social workers should not engage with schools in the SEAM process. But one interviewed social worker reported to have established a good relationship with the school

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<sup>50</sup> "Reasonable steps" as applied by social workers were defined by QLD DETE.

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that due to the privacy consideration, DHS social workers were not able to disclose the customer information related to payment suspensions, unless customers gave permission for this information to be disclosed.

and the community. Another social worker interviewed had adopted a whole-of-community engagement strategy which was to work closely with the school, a local council group and other representative bodies to ensure the community took some ownership of what was happening in it.

In general, it was reported by DHS social workers that not being able to have direct contact with the school was a real disadvantage and not effective. Since social workers shared the same goal as the school in addressing attendance issues, it was important for both parties working on the ground to give each other the best possible support.

## **Queensland**

In Logan sites, social work contact was handled by DHS Education Liaison Officers (ELO) and DHS social workers. DHS social workers were directly involved in the intervention and provision of support, whereas the DHS ELOs were responsible for decisions on actions and interactions. The DHS social worker conducted the assessment and reported back to the ELO with recommendation for further actions/interventions. For the purpose of our analysis, the ELO and social workers were seen to provide social work contact as an integrated team.

In general, it was noted that DHS social workers in Logan sites were able to directly contact the school and work with the school as part of the wider community. It was reported that cases directly referred to DHS by the school were usually associated with the most difficult families with which the school had exhausted all the strategies to engage. It was identified that referred families usually faced complex problems such as mental health, finance, gambling, drugs and alcohol issues. The ELO normally did most of the assessment and screened the case in the first instance. With the direct referral coming from the school, the ELO made direct contact with the school to get background information and an understanding of alternative programmes and flexible learning plans that were offered to the families. The evidence provided by the school that was related to the attendance issue was then considered by the DHS social worker when visiting the family. This process meant that social work contact was likely to be more effective, with social workers equipped with knowledge about the family and therefore better able to build on the work that had already been done by the school. The direct contact and engagement also meant that the social worker could understand expectations of the school.

Sometimes in approaching the family, the ELO also invited the school attendance officer to do a joint visit<sup>52</sup> to the family. The social worker also played a role as mediator to bring both parties (the parent and school) together (with pre-meeting preparation) so the parent did not feel under threat when they came into the meeting.

The social work contact approach in QLD remote sites was different to the suburban community environment approach. School principals and staff were worried about the consequences of their referrals leading to parents in the community having their income support payments suspended and there was limited communication between parties and no sharing of information between agencies.

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<sup>52</sup> As a general rule, DHS social workers did not make home visits. Refer to footnote 48 about home visiting policy for the SEAM trial.

## 8.5. Effect of income support payment suspensions

The suspension of income support payments under SEAM was designed to be the last resort in addressing the issue of unauthorised absences. If parents did not take reasonable steps to ensure their children attended school regularly, after all attempts were exhausted including the consideration of granting reasonable excuse or special circumstance exemption, a decision would be made about the suspension of income support payments.

Over the trial period, there were 119 parents in the NT who had been suspended (with respect to 162 children). Three parents in QLD (with respect to 6 children) also had their payments suspended for failure to comply with the attendance requirement of SEAM.

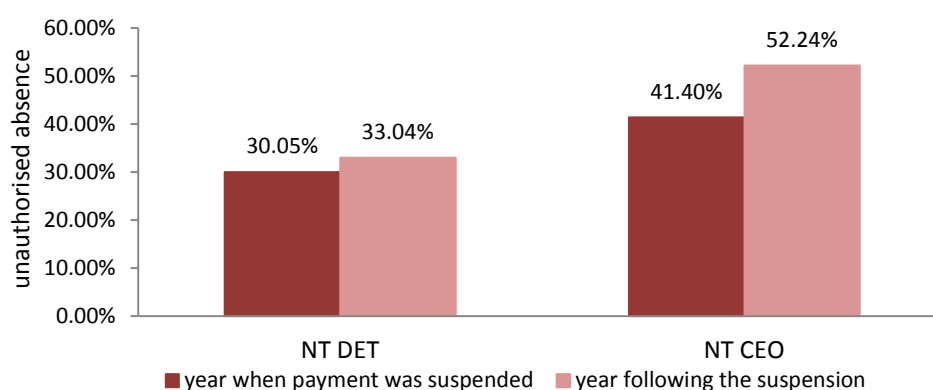
This section presents the pattern of unauthorised absence of referred students whose parent's income support payment was suspended, and feedback from interviewed school principals and education authorities on the effect of income support payment suspensions.

### 8.5.1. Patterns of unauthorised absences of referred students whose parent's income support payments were suspended under the trial

#### Northern Territory

As shown in Figure 8.5.1, the average rate of unauthorised absences of referred students was observed to increase in the year following the suspension compared to that in the year of the suspension, for both NT DET and CEO suspended students. This points to the occurrence of a relapse over time where the gain in the reduction of unauthorised absences may not have been sustained. Due to the very small number of suspensions noted above, similar analysis for QLD suspended students was not possible.

**Figure 8.5.1: average rate of unauthorised absences of referred students whose parent's income support payment was suspended**

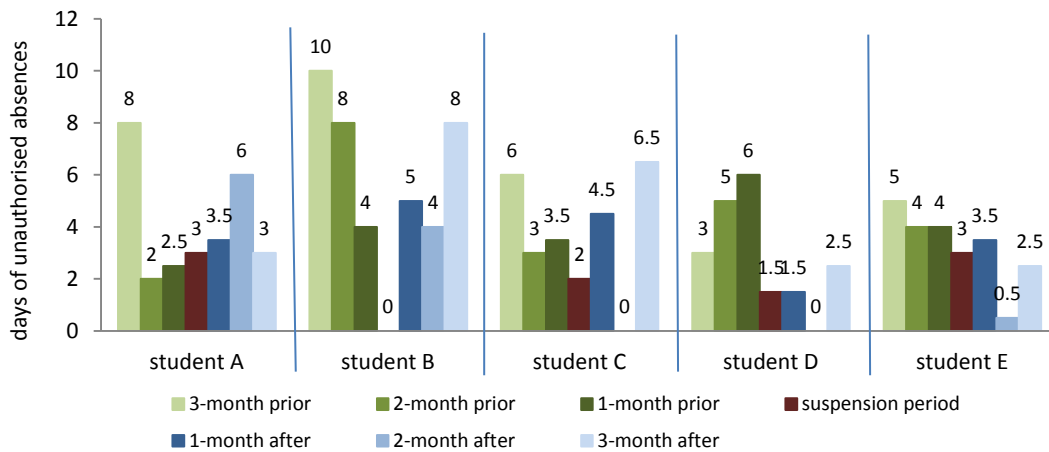


The pattern of unauthorised absences three months before and after suspension was examined for a sample of five referred students from both NT DET and CEO schools to assess whether there was an improvement associated with suspension. Similar analysis was conducted in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report and the following analysis is an update to previous findings.

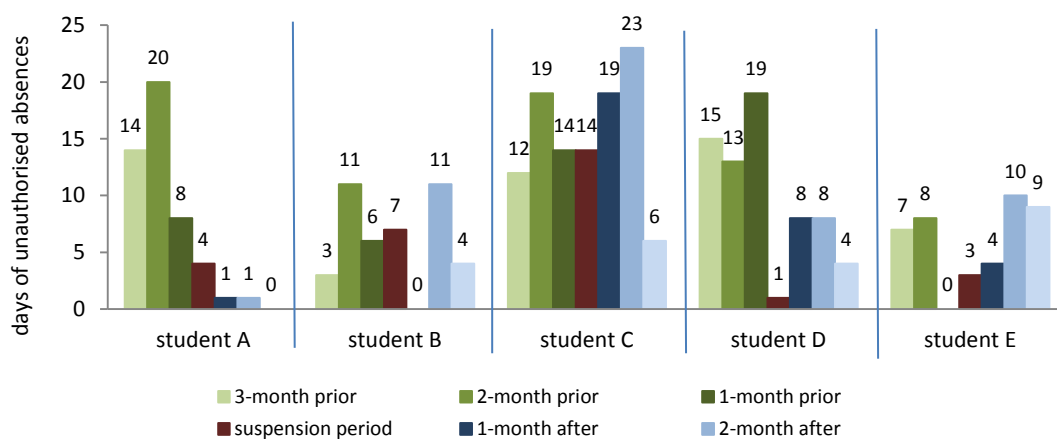
As shown in Figure 8.5.2 and Figure 8.5.3, the pattern of unauthorised absences for selected referred students was highly variable during the suspension period, and three months before and after suspension. No clear trend was observed in the change of unauthorised absences in response to income support payment suspension for these students. For the most part, unauthorised absences were lowest during the suspension period.

In most cases, however, relapse was observed within three months after suspension, despite unauthorised absences being lower on average than they were prior to the suspension. The observed relapse suggests that the suspension was unlikely to lead to permanent improvements as affected families faced complex circumstances which may have thwarted their attempts to address attendance issues.

**Figure 8.5.2: patterns of unauthorised absence of referred NT DET students before and after suspension**



**Figure 8.5.3: patterns of unauthorised absence of referred NT CEO students before and after suspension**



### Queensland

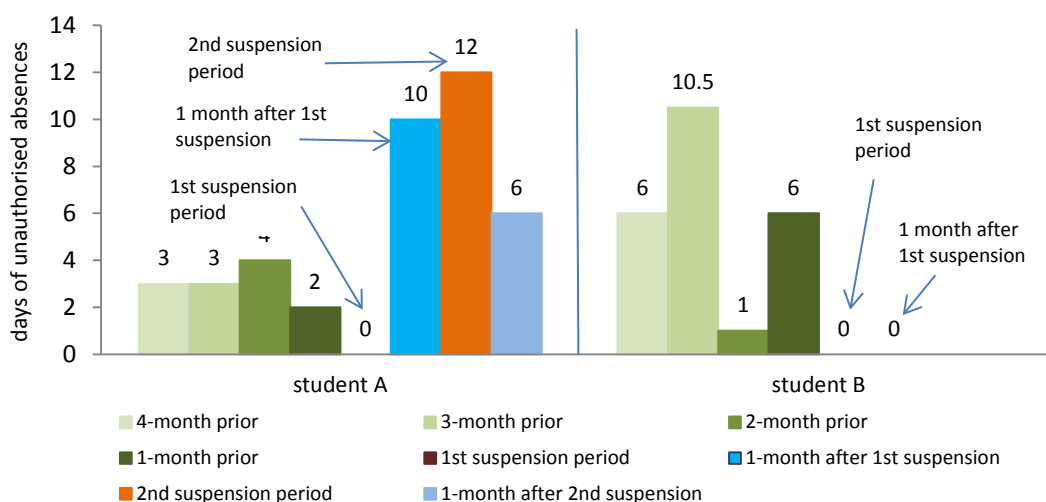
Cases of two referred QLD students whose parents' income support payments were suspended (including one parent suspended twice) were examined for their unauthorised

absences four months before the suspension and one month after the suspension. This analysis is an update to the similar analysis undertaken in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report.

As shown in Figure 8.5.4, for student A where the suspension occurred twice, the first suspension resulted in a reduction in the number of unauthorised absences to zero during the suspension period. However, unauthorised absences rose dramatically to 10 days in the month immediately after the payment was first restored. The pattern showed suspension of the parent’s income support had no sustained impact on reducing the days of unauthorised absences for this student. The student’s unauthorised absences reached its highest point during the second suspension period in spite of an observed reduction in the month following the second restoration of the payment.

For student B, the attendance notice was issued two months prior to the suspension. While the issuing of an attendance notice had a minimal effect on reducing the student’s unauthorised absence, the number of days of unauthorised absences was reduced once the payment had been suspended. In this case, only one month’s attendance data was available after the payment was restored as the suspension occurred towards the end of the school year. The zero unauthorised absence was observed one month following the payment restoration.

**Figure 8.5.4: patterns of unauthorised absences of referred QLD students before and after suspension**



### 8.5.2. Feedback on the effect of income support payment suspensions

The analysis in Section 8.5.1 showed that families who were suspended were likely to have faced complex barriers which had been entrenched for a long period. Therefore, any impact from a suspension tended to be sustained for a short period. This finding is consistent with qualitative information from the 2013 SEAM fieldwork. For instance, it was noted by school staff interviewed that they were aware of one or two families being followed up by DHS social workers and consequently had their income support payments suspended under SEAM. Although the referred students did come back to school after the suspension, their attendance was only maintained for a short period.

As previously indicated, qualitative information also suggests there was a threat effect arising from suspensions taking place. That is, knowledge of a suspension occurring in the community seemed to have an effect on other families in complying with their requirements for school attendance. But when suspensions did not occur at the time they were needed, then the threat effect arising from SEAM diminished, as it was seen as not being backed up by action.

In terms of the SEAM effect, schools indicated that the initial threat of income support payment suspensions had more impact than actual implementation of suspensions. Public meetings and schools' messages in newsletters at the commencement of the SEAM trial had helped to raise the awareness of the trial, and to clarify schools' role in assisting parents with their children' attendance issues before any punitive action took effect. Interviewed schools in NT sites noted it was initially evident that families with chronic attendance problems responded to the SEAM message by making more efforts to send their children to school. As the trial progressed, however, the families did not see any visible repercussion of not sending their children to school, which may have compromised the threat effect that was present at the start of the trial.



## 9. ASSESSMENT OF BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

### **Evaluation Questions and Key Findings:**

*EQ.7 What reasonable steps did SEAM parents take in complying with attendance requirements?*

Various reasonable steps were defined by education authorities for parents to comply with attendance requirements under SEAM. These reasonable steps generally involved parents' efforts to ensure their child's school attendance, such as taking the child to school, advising the school of absence, and engaging with the school to develop strategies in encouraging attendance.

A brief assessment of attendance data for referred students in the NT schools shows that the most common step that parents had taken when their child's attendance problem was identified was to immediately notify the school of their child's absence. It was also found that parents of students with attendance problems in NT CEO schools were more likely to engage with the school than in NT DET schools.

It was found, however, that taking reasonable steps on the part of parents did not always lead to an improvement in the child's attendance behaviour, as improvements on attendance behaviour were not observed consistently across students of parents taking reasonable steps after being issued an attendance notice. This suggests that some families might have faced additional barriers which thwarted their attempts to ensure their child attended school.

*EQ.8 Is the SEAM trial likely to lead to sustained behavioural change, measured by the pattern of reoccurrence of receiving attendance notices or having income support payments being suspended among SEAM parents over the trial period?*

The analysis of occurrence of notices issued and suspensions showed that there were only a very small number of SEAM parents who were issued with more than one notice or whose income support payments were suspended more than once.

Most SEAM parents who were only issued with one notice were motivated by the threat of suspension leading to an improvement in attendance. For those who responded positively to the threat effect, it was possible to observe their immediate behavioural change through their compliance with SEAM attendance requirements, and there were no further referrals or suspensions imposed.

For complex cases where the threat effect did not result in an immediate reaction and where further referrals occurred and notices were issued, families tended to relapse after social work support was completed or concluded at the request of the parent. The observed relapse is not unusual, as change in behaviour generally occurs in stages over time and the movement through these stages is rather cyclical. Therefore, the multiple barriers these families encountered required long-term interventions. It may be beyond the scope of the SEAM trial to fully address the issues these families faced with respect to school enrolment and attendance.

## 9.1. Reasonable steps

In addressing attendance issues, parental efforts are recognised to be critical. Under SEAM, in-scope parents were required to take reasonable steps to ensure the child attended school regularly. Reasonable steps generally involved the parents both making an effort to ensure their child's attendance and the parents engaging with the school to develop strategies to encourage attendance.

At the beginning of the SEAM attendance referral, parents were required to take reasonable steps when the issue of their child's unauthorised absences was first identified by the school and was referred to DHS. Further SEAM action would be taken, i.e. DHS issuing an attendance notice, if the school advised that parents had not taken reasonable steps to improve attendance of their school-age child since the unauthorised absence issue was identified.

Parents who were issued an attendance notice had 28 days to comply with the SEAM requirements, as stated in the following SEAM Procedural Guidelines:<sup>53</sup>

[The attendance] notice explains to parents that they have 28 days to show they are taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance and outlines the reasonable steps the parent must take to improve attendance.

At the end of the 28 days compliance period, parents' failure to take reasonable steps as defined by each education authority could have resulted in the suspension of their income support payments.

This section outlines the type of reasonable steps taken by parents when their child was identified with an attendance issue. A summary of findings from the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report about the change in attendance for students of parents taking reasonable steps after being issued with an attendance notice is also presented.

### 9.1.1. Reasonable steps taken by parents at SEAM referral

Table 9.1.1 shows a summary of reasonable steps taken by parents at SEAM referral (i.e. when the unauthorised absence problem was identified but before an attendance notice was issued). Note that information about reasonable steps taken by parents at referral was captured as part of the attendance information exchange under the automatic referral model in NT sites, but that no similar data was available for QLD sites. For this analysis, only referral information exchanged in 2010 between education authorities and DHS captures the

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<sup>53</sup> SEAM Procedural Guidelines is an internal document prepared by the SEAM policy team of the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

relevant information on reasonable steps taken by parents at SEAM referral. No such information was available beyond 2010.<sup>54</sup>

It was found that parents were reported to have taken all required reasonable steps when attendance issues were identified, for around 70 per cent of students in NT DET schools and 98 per cent in NT CEO schools who were identified with attendance issues. Parents of these students in NT DET schools tended to at least take appropriate actions to ensure their child's attendance but were less likely to directly engage with the school to develop strategies for improving attendance. The most common reasonable step taken by parents was to immediately notify the school of their child's absence. On the other hand, parents in NT CEO schools were equally likely to take appropriate steps to ensure their child's attendance and to engage with the school directly when attendance issues were identified.

**Table 9.1.1: Summary of reasonable steps taken by parents at referral in 2010, NT sites**

<i>Reasonable Steps<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Taking all steps</i>	<i>Taking at least a particular step (s)</i>	
<b>NT DET</b>			
Parents taking appropriate steps/actions to ensure their child's attendance	69.6%	97.7%	90.6%
Parents notifying the school of their child's absence			94.1%
Parents' direct engagement with the school		77.0%	
<b>NT CEO</b>			
Parents' direct engagement with the school, including ensuring the child's engagement with school support service	97.6%	99.6%	
Parents notifying the school of their child's absence		99.6%	

a. Note that 'reasonable steps' were defined separately for each education authority, where there were four 'reasonable steps' in the NT DET definition and three in the NT CEO definition. Therefore, 'reasonable steps' in this table were categorised slightly differently for the NT DET and NT CEO. Refer to Appendix 22 for the detailed description.

A detailed description of reasonable steps defined by each education authority is presented at [Appendix 22](#).

<sup>54</sup> It was confirmed by the SEAM program area that information on reasonable steps taken by parents at referral was not collected in the attendance information exchange due to the workload for schools to provide such information.

### 9.1.2. Change in attendance behaviour for referred students of parents taking reasonable steps

If parents of SEAM students with attendance problems failed to take reasonable steps to address attendance issues, they were issued an attendance notice. To comply with the SEAM attendance requirements after the attendance notice was issued, parents of referred students would need to show they were now taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance.

As previously reported in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report, analysis was conducted to examine the change in attendance behaviour for referred students of parents taking reasonable steps after receiving attendance notices. It was found that improvements on attendance behaviour were not observed consistently across referred students of parents taking reasonable steps, suggesting that some families had faced additional barriers which thwarted their attempts to make sure their children attended school.

For more details, refer to Section 6.3.2 in the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report.

## 9.2. Sustained behavioural change

### 9.2.1. Re-occurrence of attendance notices issued and income support payment suspensions

One of the indicators used to measure whether the change in attendance behaviour was sustained is to assess the occurrence of notices issued and income support payment suspensions.

As shown in Table 9.2.1, over 60 per cent of referred parents in the NT and the majority in QLD were issued with an attendance notice at least once over the course of the trial. Only a very small number of referred parents were issued with more than two notices in all sites (5 NT DET parents, 3 NT CEO parents and 2 QLD parents). As mentioned earlier in the report, overall there were more NT CEO SEAM parents who were issued with a notice than SEAM parents with children at NT DET and QLD schools.

In addition, there were only a small proportion of referred students whose parents' income support payments were suspended as a result of parents failing to improve their child's attendance or not having taken reasonable steps. QLD had the lowest proportion of referred students (3.4 per cent) whose parents' income support payments were suspended compared to NT CEO referred students (31.5 per cent) and NT DET students (16.8 per cent).

**Table 9.2.1: Occurrence of attendance notices and sanctions at the student level**

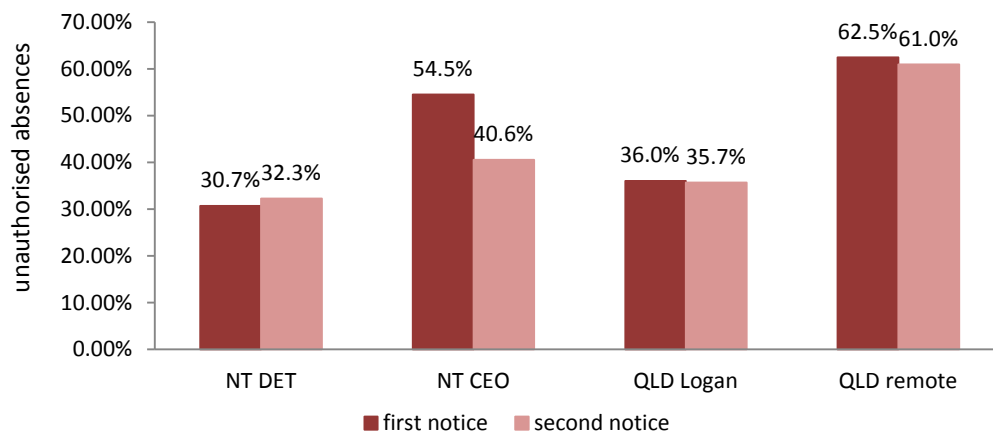
	NTDET		NTCEO		QLD	
	count	percentage	count	percentage	count	percentage
<b>attendance notices issued</b>						
notice issued once	145	65.9%	247	62.2%	148	84.6%
notice issued twice	70	31.8%	147	37.0%	25	14.3%
notice issued more than twice	5	2.3%	3	0.8%	2	1.1%
<b>attendance sanctions</b>						
suspended once	28	75.7%	89	71.2%	3	50.0%
suspended twice	9	24.3%	31	24.8%	2	33.3%
suspended more than twice	0	0.0%	5	4.0%	1	16.7%
<b>referred students where parents' income support payments were suspended</b>						
proportion	16.8%		31.5%		3.4%	

Note: columns may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Overall, it appeared that most referred students were not referred again. This in part reflects that a single notice may be sufficient to encourage behavioural change for most students. This observation is consistent with the qualitative information collected in the 2011 SEAM process review and the 2013 SEAM fieldwork.

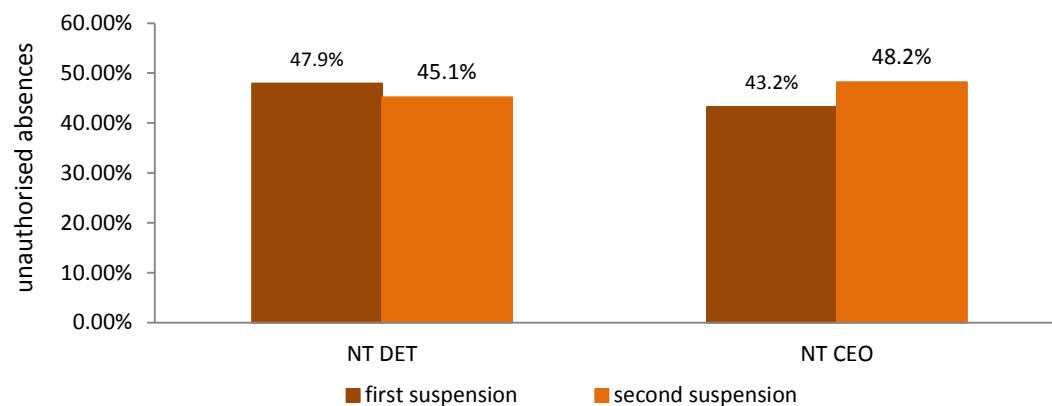
For those who were issued more than one notice, a similar rate of unauthorised absences was observed for referred students in NT DET and QLD schools at the time (year) when the first notice and second notice was issued. But for referred students in NT CEO schools, the average rate of unauthorised absences was reduced when the second notice was issued, as shown in Figure 9.2.1.

**Figure 9.2.1: Average rate of unauthorised absences – comparison between first and second notice**



In Figure 9.2.2, the average rate of unauthorised absences was slightly reduced after the second suspension for suspended students in NT DET schools, but was increased slightly for those in NT CEO schools. As there were only three QLD students whose parents' income support payments were suspended more than once, not enough data were available for this analysis.

**Figure 9.2.2: Average rate of unauthorised absences – comparison between first and second suspension**



The analysis shows that, in general, the reoccurrence of referral notice issued or suspensions was unlikely to have led to an improvement in reducing unauthorised absences. This suggests that affected families might need long-term interventions to address attendance issues, which was beyond the scope of the trial.

### 9.2.2. Sustainability of gains in attendance behaviour

Qualitative information from the 2011 SEAM process review indicated that most SEAM parents were likely to be motivated by the threat of suspension to encourage attendance. For those who responded positively to the threat of suspension under SEAM, it was possible to observe immediate behaviour change with referred students complying with SEAM requirements and as a consequence, not being referred again.

For the remaining group, most students were re-referred as any observed improved attendance and behaviour was not sustained. It was noted by school principals in the 2013

SEAM evaluation fieldwork that the changed behaviour was often only sustained during the period of engagement between families and social workers, and that families tended to relapse after this support was either completed, or concluded at the request of the parent. As shown in Figure 9.2.3 and 9.2.4, for those who were referred or suspended multiple times, there appears to be no consistent reduction in unauthorised absences after punitive actions were implemented.

**Figure 9.2.3: Cases - average rate of unauthorised absences for students being referred more than twice**

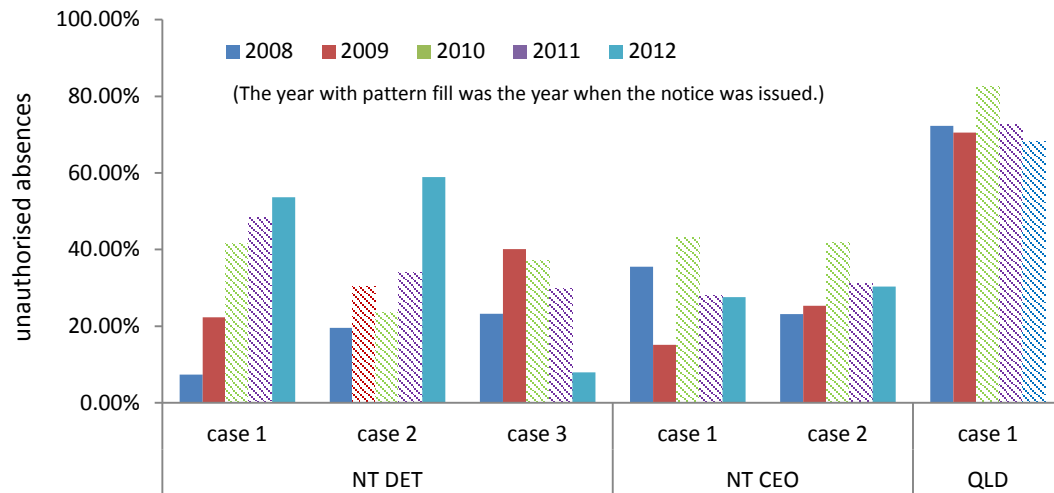
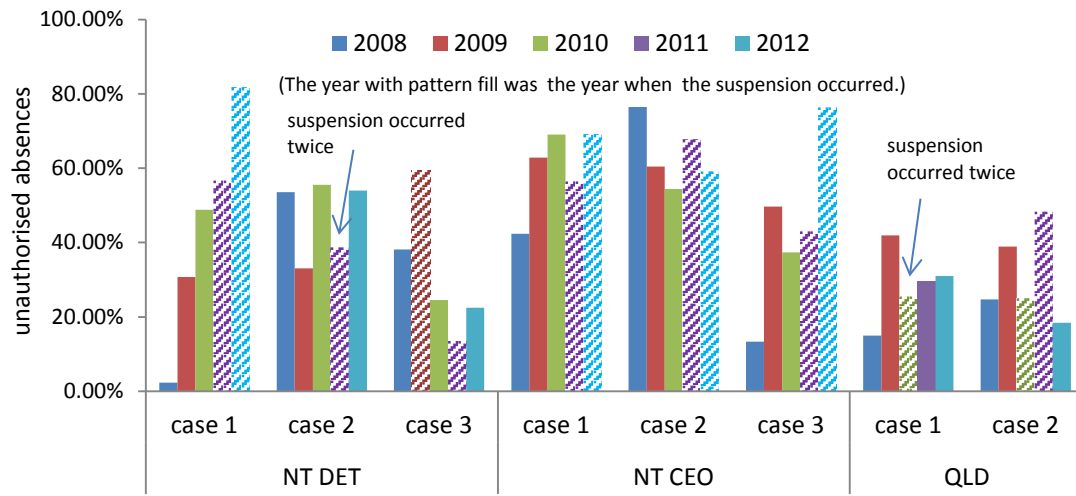


Figure 9.2.3 shows the average rate of unauthorised absences over the trial period for six students whose parents were issued with more than two attendance notices, including where parents were issued with more than one notice in the same year. For NT sites, a mixed response was observed to multiple notices with three cases with a reduced rate of unauthorised absences after the first notice(s) and two cases with more unauthorised absences observed after multiple notices. There was only one case in the analysis which showed a reduction in unauthorised absences after notices were issued, but the extent of the change had not been substantial.

Similarly, Figure 9.2.4 shows the average rate of unauthorised absences over the SEAM trial for eight students whose parents' income support payment were suspended more than once. A relapse was observed for most of the cases. Relapse occurred within the same year the suspension occurred or the year following the suspension.

These results are consistent with the general observations reported in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork and the 2011 SEAM process review by DHS social workers who were directly involved in the SEAM interventions.

**Figure 9.2.4: Cases - average rate of unauthorised absences for students being suspended more than once**





## 10. LESSONS LEARNT

The focus of any social policy trial, by its nature, is to provide a learning platform and evidence base for developing and refining any policy ideas. In particular, one of the purposes of a social policy trial is to test the underlying assumptions related to factors influencing behaviour change and resources required to support the change, as identified in the Theory of Change.

In undertaking the SEAM trial, three key questions were asked:

- Was SEAM a good policy idea?
- Was SEAM effective?
- What were the challenges and lessons learnt from the implementation of the trial?

### 10.1. Reflection on the rationale of the SEAM trial

The Theory of Change for the SEAM trial in Section 3 describes the underlying reasons for designing a policy measure like SEAM. The importance of parental efforts in encouraging education and the need for halting intergenerational disadvantage through better schooling outcomes underpins SEAM policy. Qualitative information from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork shed some light on how education authorities and school principals perceived such a policy measure.

Consistent feedback was received from interviewing school principals and education authorities on the rationale of the SEAM trial. In most cases, schools or state and territory education authorities in the NT and QLD acknowledged that a policy measure like SEAM (with the threat of punitive actions and provision of social work contact) was useful as part of a suite of measures and strategies (including rewarding schemes) aimed at improving school enrolment and attendance. This was in spite of the issues raised by schools related to the implementation of the trial.

Qualitative information from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork also indicated that the local community was in support of a policy measure that was punitive in nature to address attendance issues. In particular, the community wanted immediate action to be made visible locally. It was pointed out that the implementation of such a measure as SEAM would need the support from the community, thus greater collaboration both prior to implementation and over the trial between schools, communities and policy makers was essential to its effectiveness. For various reasons, however, this did not consistently occur.

Compared with the prosecution process imposed under QLD and NT legislation for dealing with student unauthorised absences, SEAM had a built-in support structure to assist affected families and sanction was the last resort. The prosecution process involved taking a family to court and imposing a fine. Such a process was not only costly in terms of the school's time and resources, it would also break any relationships the family had with the school and put financial strain on the family without being provided with support. It was noted that the prosecution process was not utilised in some schools for the above reasons.

Some schools indicated that if the SEAM trial had been implemented as initially outlined, it could have addressed attendance barriers more effectively. One school felt that ‘... the new SEAM<sup>55</sup> model may be more collaborative’ which will be an improvement over the trial.

As described in the evaluation scope (Section 4.1), it was not in the scope for the final evaluation to assess the appropriateness of the SEAM trial in terms of underlying issues related to rights and responsibilities from a moral perspective. Nevertheless, feedback from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork and the 2011 SEAM process review suggested that a school’s view on the underlying philosophical and ethical issues arising from the SEAM trial could potentially influence its participation in the trial. School principals who believed that cutting payments was not appropriate tended to be reluctant to take part. Schools in full support of SEAM and actively involved, indicated that SEAM was not a punitive approach and the offer of social work support assisted affected families in ensuring their children attended and benefited from school.

## **10.2. Challenges and lessons learnt**

Qualitative findings outlined in Section 10.1 suggest that SEAM was generally considered to be useful by schools and NT and QLD education authorities as part of a suite of policy measures aimed at improving attendance. Evaluation findings throughout the report, however, have highlighted the challenges in translating potentially good policy into effective implementation to achieve intended outcomes. Some of the challenges and lessons learnt from the trial are outlined below.

### **10.2.1. Implementation of the SEAM trial**

#### **Communication at SEAM implementation**

The Theory of Change for the SEAM trial clearly identifies, as the first step in influencing behavioural change (Section 3), that the implementation of the trial needs effective communication to raise awareness of SEAM.

Evaluation of the communication process for SEAM implementation (Section 6) suggests that it was challenging to raise awareness and ensure a good understanding of the measure, despite communication strategies being put in place at the beginning of the trial. Findings from the 2013 SEAM fieldwork suggest that failure to appropriately convey SEAM objectives meant that the SEAM model had not been fully understood. In particular, it may not have been clear to some stakeholders that SEAM was different to the prosecution process under QLD and NT legislation, as SEAM was expected to provide social work support to deal with complex circumstances.

It is apparent that communicating the SEAM messages to encourage change in behaviour was a time and resource intensive process. While it was more efficient to only notify in-scope parents whose child’s enrolment details were not found at the first enrolment

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<sup>55</sup> The ‘new SEAM’ model refers to a new model of SEAM that was introduced in 2013 in the Northern Territory as part of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory package.

verification in QLD, the mail out approach to all in-scope parents used in NT sites appeared to be an effective in raising awareness among parents when SEAM was first introduced.

The effective operation of SEAM relied on a good understanding of SEAM objectives and requirements among participants and key stakeholders assisting in the trial's implementation. The lack of clarity to families or communities about the school's role in the determination of issuing notices or suspending payments may have caused unintended consequences for the school, as the school may have been perceived as 'the bad guy' by implementing the trial. Once a false perception had been established, it would have been very difficult to change.

The Theory of Change for the SEAM trial also identifies that it was necessary to ensure effective communication for interaction among the governments, education authorities and participating schools during the implementation of the trial.

Moreover, an effective communication model required a consistent and collaborative approach to ensure all stakeholders were informed. In NT sites, only a few information sessions were held for selected schools; while in QLD, all school principals attended information sessions together with training provided to clarify the measure.

In addition, communication barriers between SEAM schools and DHS social workers, identified in Section 8.4.5, demonstrated the challenge in integrating frontline representatives from different agencies in working collaboratively in a streamlined process.

#### *Alignment of IT infrastructure / data capability and implementation requirements*

One of the essential resources required for the implementation of the SEAM trial was the provision of real time attendance data, identified in the Theory of Change (Section 3). It was apparent that moving to the automatic attendance referral process in NT sites in 2010 resulted in SEAM process being more data driven.

DHS was responsible for linking attendance data with customer information to conduct scope checks and determine further actions. The attendance data exchange process was undertaken manually, and was therefore more labour intensive, as a result of the automatic attendance referral. This potentially jeopardised the process with the risk of errors.

For SEAM schools, the provision of attendance data became an administrative burden which was considered a major issue for the SEAM trial. Without being properly funded for this administrative requirement, it was noted in the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork that some schools had to use teaching resources to meet SEAM data requirements.

For all parties involved, it was not realistic to make the fortnightly data exchange happen as originally intended. Delay in the data exchange often occurred and as a result, there was a large lag between absence data being assessed and the issuing of a SEAM notice. In some cases, the family had been issued with a SEAM notice which based on attendance data that was six months old.

For the discretionary referral process implemented in QLD, the attendance referral process only took place when a referral was made by the school principal. This approach involved less intensive data exchange compared to the automatic referral model implemented in the NT. But the process involved logging into a secure portal in order to exchange student

information due to privacy requirements and database security concerns, which was still considered to be time-consuming from school principals' perspective.

Apart from the attendance referral process, the enrolment information exchange process under SEAM was also a time-consuming data process which involved manually linking DHS customers with enrolment details of their child subject to SEAM. As described in Section 7.1, school enrolment is a dynamic process, so it is possible that students can become unenrolled throughout the school year for various reasons. Currently there is no enrolment data sharing between different schooling systems or across education authorities of different jurisdictions. Therefore, a national enrolment data tracking system is needed to effectively keep track of changes in school enrolment over time.

### *Suspensions and implications*

As a deterrent strategy, it was intended that the SEAM trial would influence behavioural change through the threat of suspension rather than the suspension itself, as described in the Theory of Change for the SEAM trial (Section 3).

Qualitative evidence shows that when communities heard about the commencement of the SEAM trial, they were supportive of its objective and had anticipated SEAM actions and effects resulting from its implementation. Over time, however, communities perceived that the threat of SEAM was not backed up by action and meaningful consequences.

This suggests that a balance needed to be achieved between the threat and timely action including actual suspension if justified. The threat could only exist with the suspension being perceived to be possible and being visible to the targeted group. While the suspension was never the focus of SEAM, when non-compliance occurred, people needed to see the consequences of non-compliance. As commented on by one school principal, '...I did this and that's my consequence, thus I should not do it again.' Lack of timely repercussion was a critical issue with SEAM. With the long delay in the process of making referrals and decisions on actions, it was reported that parents could not even recall why suspension had occurred in the first instance. The threat effect may have been compromised by lack of an established connection between the cause and the consequence through prompt actions.

### *More reflections*

Given the nature of a trial which may require changes to policy parameters over the course of the trial period, there was a view reported from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork that the trial should have been refined further over time when issues related to implementation were identified. If it had been refined over time, the trial may have had the potential to work well. The refinement process of a social policy trial may be perceived to be one of the purposes for its implementation, that is, to test out policy and make changes over the trial period where necessary. For the SEAM trial, however, the real issue with refinement was the difficulty in factoring the change into IT functions. Depending on the type and extent of policy changes needed, it could be difficult to modify IT systems after functions had already been built in (which usually took six to eight months lead time as reported by DHS). In addition to availability of resources, the capacity to deliver also depended on how resources were prioritised among a variety of IT tasks within DHS.

In reflecting on the lessons learnt from the trial, feedback from the 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork indicated that inter-agency communication and collaboration could be improved. One area identified was that the design and implementation of a new policy required a good understanding of complexities involved in implementation. Improved collaboration, therefore, could possibly be achieved through increased communication and better consultation across agencies at the planning stage and during the implementation. There was also a need for a well-developed, detailed and encompassing implementation plan to ensure the consistency and efficiency of the implementation under circumstances such as high staff turnover.

The 2013 SEAM evaluation fieldwork recommended that a community focussed strategy, particularly in remote locations, should be part of the implementation plan where a whole-of-community approach is adopted. It was reported that the new SEAM model would benefit from more focus on community engagement.

#### 10.2.2. Social work contact model under SEAM

The Theory of Change for the SEAM trial indicates that the success of a policy measure with a punitive component requires support services to be an integral part of the measure. Despite the importance and necessity for the provision of support services, the delivery of social work contact under SEAM encountered challenges, particularly in providing remote servicing and in dealing with complex barriers referred families faced.

Requirements under SEAM meant that social workers were required to contact families within seven days of receiving a notice – this provided a guaranteed period of engagement. But the general feedback from DHS social workers was that this timeframe was unrealistic under the automatic referral model. Up to one hundred families could have received a notice in a given week in one community and providing social work contact to all these families within the required timeframe was unrealistic.

For remote communities which were diverse and geographically vast, issues arose with the 28-day compliance period as, for some communities, remote servicing was only provided every six weeks. Problems also arose when customers could not be easily contacted or it was difficult to sustain ongoing conversations with families in instances where there were no telephone services. Adding to this, a lack of support services in these communities meant that social workers could not refer customers on to further services, particularly during suspension periods.

Despite these challenges, substantial efforts were made by DHS social workers to provide support during the trial period. But an issue was raised by social workers that the nature of the SEAM trial was at odds with the typical approach used by social workers, namely the 'strengths based approach',<sup>56</sup> when providing support. Such an approach rewards

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<sup>56</sup> A strength-based approach in social work support focuses on encouraging change in behaviour by targeting people's strengths, based on which improvements could possibly be made gradually leading to a more permanent positive outcome over time.

improvements in behaviour and builds on strengths, setting goals and capitalising on small steps forward. It was noted that the punitive component of SEAM was counterproductive to this approach as the measure included limited capacity to acknowledge a 50 per cent increase in school attendance, as an individual may '... still not be meeting the requirement'.

Social work support under SEAM was designed to be directed to cases where multiple barriers were present, thus it was an intensive and ongoing process which usually extended beyond the compliance period and even after the trial period. The potential success of social work support was reliant on building a trusted relationship with parents which was difficult to achieve in the short timeframe over the SEAM trial.

## GLOSSARY

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### Authorised absences

- Refer to instances where a student's absence from school is considered authorised or approved. Education authorities define authorised absences to include sickness, funerals/sorry business, holidays or suspension.

### Attendance benchmark

- Refers to the attendance rate in the NT at which action under the SEAM attendance component is activated. The attendance benchmark refers to more than five unauthorised absences in a ten week period (or less than 90 per cent attendance).

### Attendance notice

- Is issued to a parent in the instance where a school has advised the Department of Human Services (DHS) that the parent is not taking reasonable steps to ensure their child's attendance at school is satisfactory. In the NT, the attendance benchmark triggers referral under SEAM. In QLD, a discretionary approach enables school principals to refer students who they deem to have unsatisfactory attendance.

### Attendance referral

- Referral under the attendance component of SEAM is triggered when schools or education authorities notify DHS that a student is not attending to the satisfaction of the school (failure to reach the attendance benchmark in the NT). A list of names is provided to DHS by schools for scope checking to determine if they are subject to SEAM requirements.

### Attendance sanction/attendance suspension

- Refers to the instance in which a parent fails to comply with an attendance notice and therefore is subject to an income support payment suspension under the attendance component of SEAM.

### Compliance period

- Refers to the period beginning from the delivery of an enrolment or attendance notice that outlines the period in which a parent has to comply with the details of the notice. For the enrolment component, a parent has 14 days after a notice is given. For the attendance component, a parent has 28 days after a notice is given. In instances where a notice is posted, an additional period of up to seven days may be permitted to allow compliance.

### Enrolment Information Exchange

- Refers to an information exchange between DHS and education authorities to collect enrolment details for in-scope children under the enrolment component of SEAM.

### Enrolment notice/notification letter

- In-scope parents who are identified in DHS records as having a child of compulsory school age and whose enrolment details have not been confirmed will be sent an

enrolment notice. The enrolment notice requires that a parent provide their child's enrolment details to DHS. The compliance period is 14 days.

#### Enrolment sanction/enrolment suspension

- Refers to the instance in which a parent fails to comply with an enrolment notice and therefore is subject to an income support payment suspension under the enrolment component of SEAM.

#### Grey Literature

- Grey literature refers to reports produced by government and non-government sectors.

#### In-scope – enrolment component

- Children are in-scope for the enrolment component of SEAM if their parents:
  - live in a SEAM trial location;
  - are in receipt of a schooling requirement payment or has applied to receive a schooling requirement payment; and
  - have at least 14% care of a child of compulsory school age.

#### In-scope – attendance component

- Children are in-scope for the enrolment component of SEAM if their parents:
  - live in a SEAM trial location;
  - are in receipt of a schooling requirement payment or has applied to receive a schooling requirement payment;
  - have at least 14 per cent care of a child of compulsory school age; and
  - their child is attending a SEAM trial school.

#### Reasonable excuse

- In the event that there exists an excuse for failure to provide enrolment details or where a student cannot attend school or the parent/carer cannot take reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance, a reasonable excuse exemption can be applied for a short period of time. Once this period ends, the parent is still expected to take reasonable steps or improve their child's attendance.
- Reasonable Excuses are set out in the first instance by the *Social Security (Administration) (Schooling Requirement) Determination 2009 (No.1)* and the SEAM procedural guidelines. A reasonable excuse can include moving house, illness and adverse weather conditions.

#### Reasonable steps

- Under the attendance component of SEAM, a parent has 28 days to show they are taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance. Reasonable steps are determined by education authorities and defined in the procedural guidelines. They include things such as: ensuring a child has arrangements for transportation to and from school, establishing appropriate routines to encourage school attendance, engaging directly with schools to improve their child's attendance and ensuring the child engages with school support services.



### Special circumstance

- In the event of a circumstance that has a direct impact on the ability of a parent/carer to ensure their child is enrolled at school or prevents them from taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance, a special circumstance exemption can be applied. Once the period for the special exemption ends, the parent is still expected to take reasonable steps or improve their child's attendance.
- What constitutes a special circumstance determination is set out in the first instance by the *Social Security (Administration) (Schooling Requirement) Determination 2009 (No.1)* and the SEAM procedural guidelines.

### Statistically significant

- A statistically significant finding means that there is a good chance the statistic is reliable and that a relationship between the groups of numbers exists, rather than it being a chance result. It doesn't automatically mean that the difference has practical significance, or that it has any decision making value, as very small changes can be statistically significant. After finding a statistically significant relationship, it is important to evaluate its practical significance to determine its value in decision making.

### Unauthorised absences

- Refer to instances where a student's absence from school is not approved or accepted by the school. Education authorities define unauthorised absences as unexplained, un-notified or unacceptable absences from school.  
The unauthorised absence rate is calculated by taking the total days of unauthorised absences and dividing by the total number of enrolled days for each student.

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## APPENDIXES

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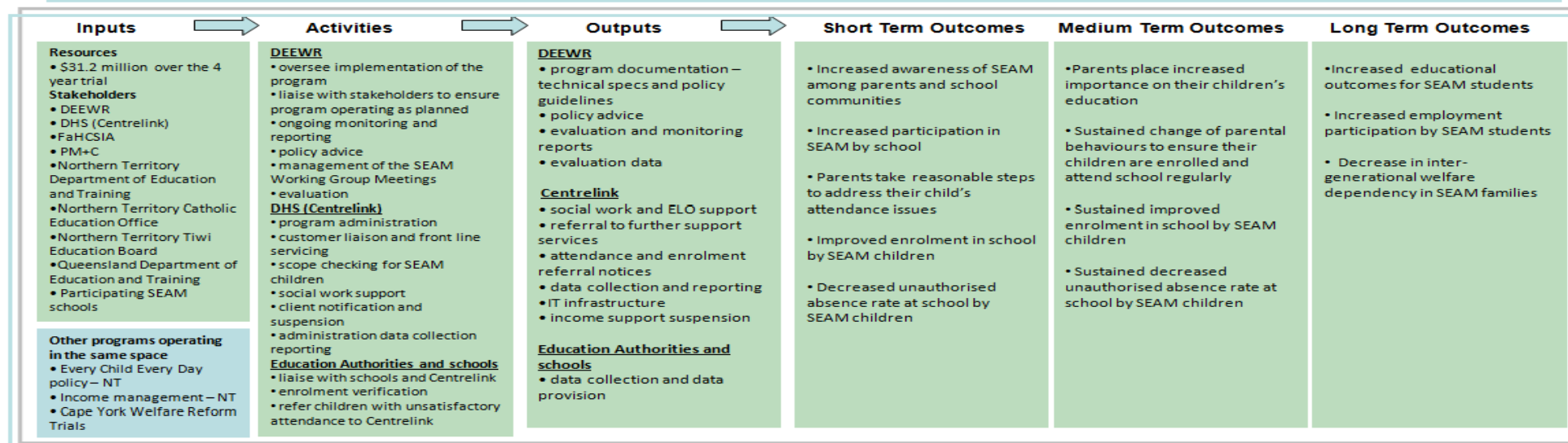
## Appendix 1: Program logic for the SEAM trial

### Program Logic Model: Improving School Enrolment and Attendance Through Welfare Reform Measure

**Program objective:** trials the use of attaching conditions to income support payments with the aim of encouraging parents to ensure that their children of compulsory school age are enrolled in school and attending school regularly.

**Program targets:** unenrolled children and children with low attendance

**Program scope:** parents with 14% or more care of a compulsory school-aged child, living in a trial site and in receipt of a relevant Category H payment for the enrolment component. For the attendance component, their child must also be attending a SEAM-trial school.



#### Problem/ Need Being Addressed

- There is an established attendance problem in SEAM sites.
- There is an established link between low levels of education and the increased likelihood of welfare dependency, unemployment and involvement in the criminal justice system.
- Contribute to the evidence base on the use of welfare conditionality.

#### Barriers

- cycle of welfare dependency, mixed values around the value of formal education, housing, financial hardship, family circumstances, health and medical issues including addiction, remote location

#### Assumptions

- SEAM assumes that a parent will be motivated by the threat of payment suspension to the extent that they display reasonable steps to address their child's attendance problems.
- The program assumes that parent's can display a change in behaviour within the 28-day compliance period for the attendance component.
- There is an assumed level of under-enrolment in SEAM sites (or nationally).

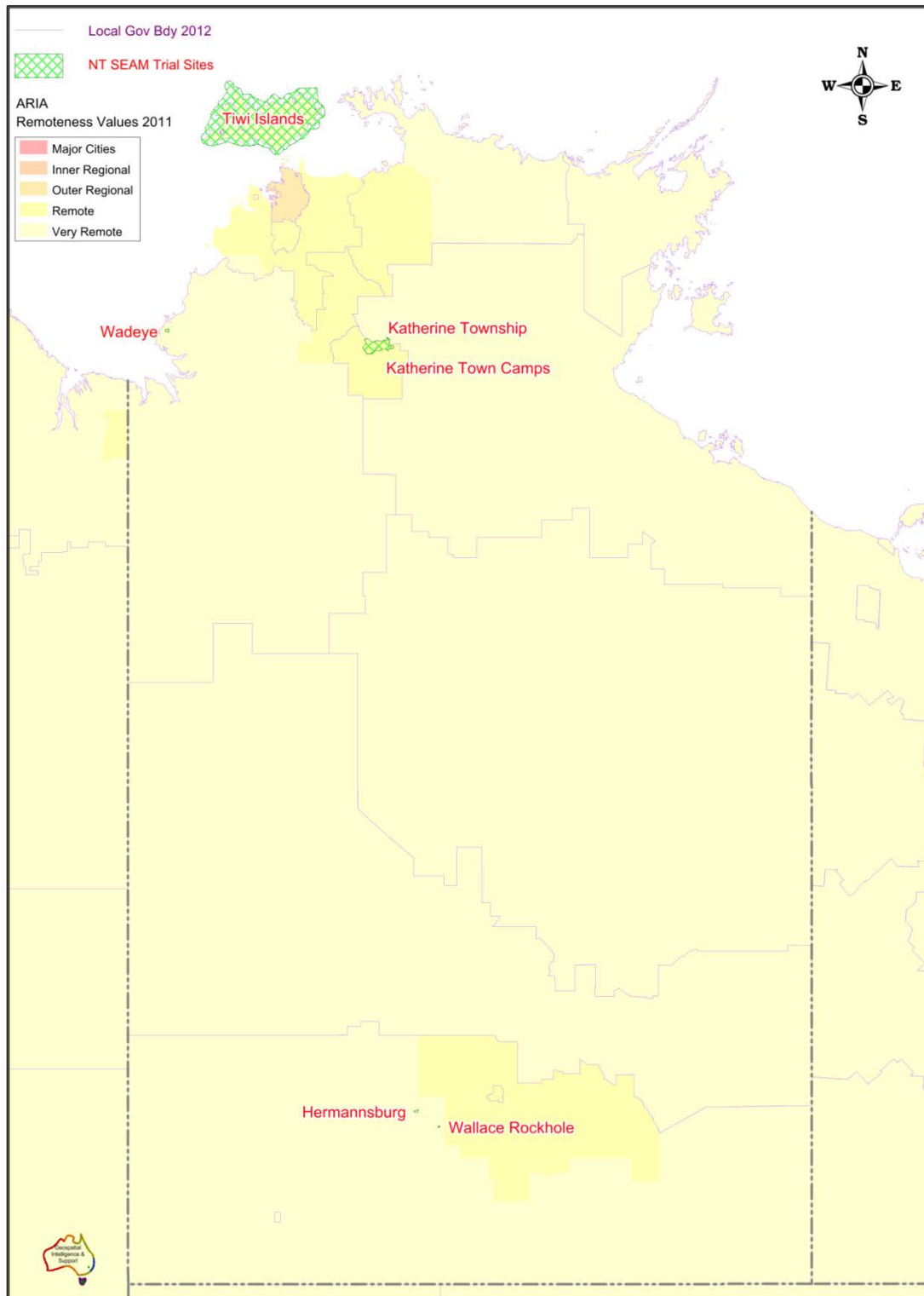
#### Key Performance Indicators:

1. The proportion of parents taking reasonable steps to ensure their children are enrolled and attend schools regularly
2. The extent to which SEAM children's enrolments have been increased and sustained
3. The extent to which SEAM children's attendance has been improved

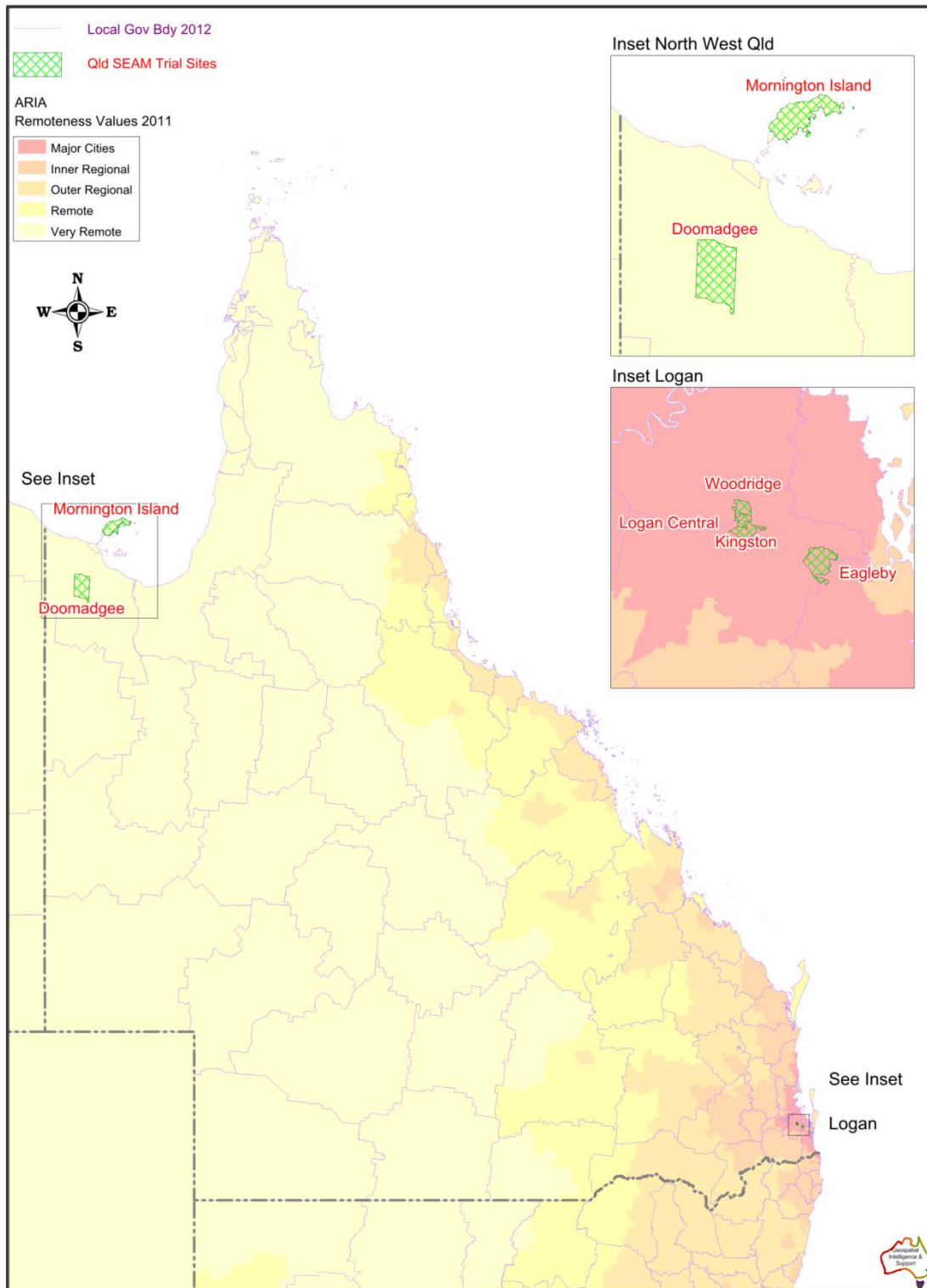
#### Data Source

- Enrolment and attendance data from state and territory education authorities
- Centrelink administrative data
- Centrelink case reports
- Commissioned and in-house qualitative research – fieldwork and stakeholder interviews
- Program financial administrative data
- Comparison group enrolment and attendance data

## Appendix 2: Map of SEAM trial sites in the NT



### Appendix 3: Map of SEAM trial sites in QLD



## **Appendix 4: Commonwealth, state and territory legislation and policy initiatives for improving school attendance**

### **Northern Territory**

In the NT, the *Northern Territory Education Act (the Act) 1979* establishes the requirements for school enrolment and attendance. The Act mandates that children who are of compulsory school age (at least 6 years old and under 15 years old) must receive an education at either a government school, a registered non-government school or by means of a registered home education programme. It is compulsory for a parent who has the actual custody of a school-age child to enrol the child not later than 14 term days after the day the child turns the minimum compulsory school age. The penalty for failing to ensure attendance is up to \$200 for each parent. The amendments to Part 4 of the *Northern Territory Education Act* came into effect in June 2011. The amended Act gives powers to authorised officers (attendance and truancy officers) to engage families and to compel parents to attend a compulsory conference to develop an Individual Attendance Plan. If the parent fails to attend or comply with the plan the officer can issue an infringement notice.

Since 2010, the key strategy for addressing school enrolment and attendance in the NT has been *Every Child, Every Day* (ECED). The ECED policy was first developed in late 2009 and its implementation began in 2010. The ECED initiative included a range of strategies that set out how the Northern Territory Government worked with families, schools and communities to improve the enrolment, attendance and participation of young Territorians in school. The initiative also recognised the diversity of people and places within the NT and was flexible in meeting local needs and adaptive to the individual situations of families, children and young people.

Over the SEAM trial period, the Northern Territory Government and Australian Government jointly entered into the Smarter School National Partnership, to provide support for low socioeconomic status school communities to improving learning outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Queensland**

In QLD, the schooling obligation for parents under the *Queensland, Education (General Provision) Act* is to ensure that every child of compulsory school age (at least 6 years and 6 months, and less than 16 years old)<sup>57</sup> is enrolled in a state or non-state school and attends that school for every day of the educational programme for which the child is enrolled. Under the *Education Act*, prosecution of one or both parents may occur if the parent(s) do not fulfil their legal obligation in regard to school enrolment and attendance of their school-age child. The penalty for non-compliance ranges from six penalty units for a first offence to 12 penalty units for a second or subsequent offence, where one penalty unit equals \$250.

During the same period as the SEAM trial, a range of policy measures aimed at improving attendance were implemented in the SEAM sites in QLD, either Australian Government funded such as the Smarter Schools National Partnerships for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities or state funded initiatives including the Every Child Counts (ECC) programme and the Beenleigh Together Against Truancy programme.

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<sup>57</sup> A child is no longer of compulsory school age if he/she has completed Year 10.



The ECC initiative was a three-year pilot programme to improve student attendance and learning outcomes in 12 Low Socio-Economic Status National Partnership schools in Logan by providing a whole child, whole school and whole family approach to service delivery. The participating schools were provided with additional resources and services to improve student learning outcomes, family support services, parental skills and whole school approaches to positive behaviour, with a focus on improved and sustainable practice.

The Beenleigh Together Against Truancy programme was a partnership with the Queensland Department of Education and Employment (DETE), the Queensland Police Service and the local shopping centre at Beenleigh. The programme received funding from the Queensland Government that was used for a vehicle and employment of a Truancy Officer by Beenleigh Police Services. It also involved students being asked to show their out-of-school ID pass which has a photo included, if a student is not at school during school hours.

In addition, school-based interventions are often preferred options for schools in QLD to initiate the process of dealing with attendance issues. These interventions are generally designed to tailor to situations specific to schools. While some schools tend to adopt schemes such as rewarding good attendance and promoting attendance via social media broadcasting, others may take a more punitive approach such as adopting a zero-tolerance approach.

### **Australian Government initiatives**

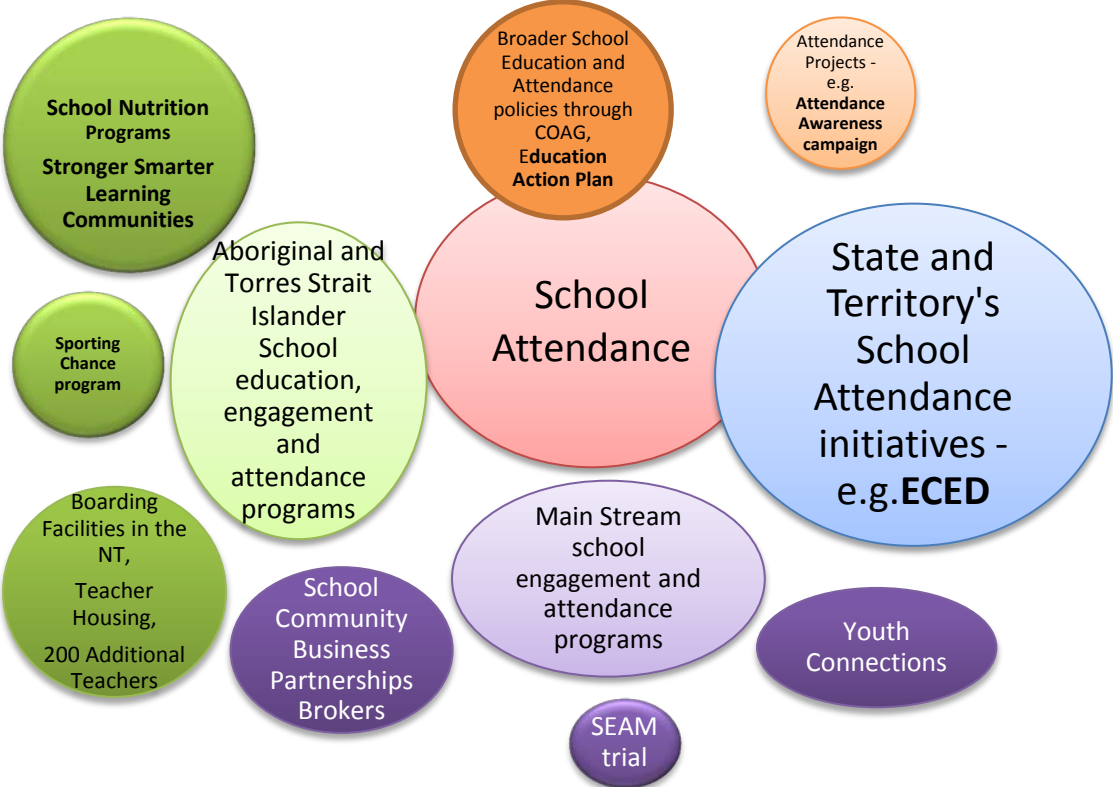
A range of policy initiatives have been introduced by the Australian Government to collectively improve and sustain school enrolment and attendance. For example, the Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities is a joint initiative between the Australian Government and state and territory governments to support education reform activities for improved learning outcomes and wellbeing of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This initiative provided participating schools with funding to facilitate adoption of best practice management, innovative operational arrangements and tailored learning opportunities for students. Encouraging attendance has been part of the strategy under the initiative for achieving intended education outcomes in the long run.

The Australian Government, together with Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, established the 'Tri-border Attendance Strategy Project' that allowed the sharing of information across borders to address the issue of absenteeism resulting from the regular movement of families between communities and states. A central database was established to share student enrolment and attendance details and education plans across targeted schools so that teachers could plan sustainable, consistent and engaging learning programmes.

Another example is the Cape York Welfare Reform: Student Attendance Case Management Framework. This measure aims to tackle the student attendance problem through a collaborative partnership between parents and schools. Based in schools in each participating community, Attendance Case Managers visited parents if a student was late to or absent from school, made referrals to services, supported parents in meeting their obligations and engaged with all community partners and service providers.

As illustrated in Figure 4.1, SEAM was one among a number of interventions in place across various locations to address attendance problems. For example, the Parent and Community Engagement programme, Sporting Chance Program, and School Nutrition Program were being delivered as part of the Australian Government’s initiatives. Along with SEAM, these programmes have contributed and supplemented the Australian Government’s efforts to improve school attendance.

**Figure 4.1: A suite of policy initiatives for improving school attendance**



## **Appendix 5: Enrolment component of the SEAM trial**

### **Eligibility for the enrolment component**

A child was in scope for the enrolment component of the SEAM trial if they met the following criteria:

- A child was of compulsory schooling age, according to the Education Act of the relevant state or territory.
- A child was not receiving income support payments in his/her own right and was not receiving any ABSTUDY payment which included a component of living allowance.
- A child was in at least 14 per cent care of a person who resided in a SEAM trial site and was receiving (or suspended on) a schooling requirement payment.

If these conditions were met, the parent was in scope for the enrolment component of SEAM in respect of that child. This meant that in-scope parents had to comply with the schooling requirements in order to receive income support payment.

The enrolment component consisted of two parts:

- The enrolment verification was conducted to gather enrolment details from in-scope parents of their school-age child at the beginning of the school year with QLD also verifying enrolments mid-year. An ongoing process continued throughout the year to collect enrolment details for students who came into scope for SEAM after the enrolment verification.
- For parents failing to provide enrolment details, an enrolment notification letter was issued to advise them of the 14-day compliance period to notify DHS of their child's enrolment details. In the case of non-compliance, an enrolment sanction was applied<sup>58</sup>.

### **Enrolment verification and compliance**

At the first stage of the SEAM enrolment process in the NT during 2009, DHS sent all in-scope parents an enrolment notification letter which requested enrolment details for each of their compulsory school-age children. This letter was sent on commencement of the SEAM trial or as parents came into scope throughout the year. All enrolment details provided were subsequently verified by the relevant education authorities.

As shown in Table 5.1, this process was altered in 2010 to reduce administrative burden on DHS and the education authorities. A enrolment information exchange was conducted by matching the school enrolment data with DHS customer data. The enrolment information exchange was implemented in 2010 in the NT and in QLD where the enrolment component of the SEAM trial was first introduced. In addition, the enrolment information exchange was conducted twice a year instead of once a year in QLD from 2011 to capture a student's enrolment movement.

**Table 5.1: Summary of SEAM enrolment verification process over the trial period**

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<sup>58</sup> This refers to the original two step enrolment process used in 2009.

SEAM site	2009 pre bulk information exchange	2010	2011 bulk information exchange	June 2012
NT sites	Once a year exchange: each in-scope parent was contacted for enrolment details of their school-age child.	Once a year bulk exchange: In-scope parents were only contacted if no enrolment details were found through the use of school data	Once a year bulk exchange	One bulk exchange
QLD sites	n/a		Twice a year bulk exchange	One bulk exchange

#### Pre-enrolment information exchange

The enrolment component of the SEAM trial was initially introduced at the beginning of the school term in 2009 in the NT trial sites. DHS identified the parents in scope for the trial by using the database containing income support recipient data. Parents subject to SEAM in each trial location in the NT were issued with an enrolment notification letter (along with information introducing the SEAM trial) requiring them to provide details of their school-age child's enrolment at a school (or of their registration for home schooling).

Parents were given at least 14 days to provide the requested details. This period could be extended by DHS for a variety of reasons, including:

- change of address (to a location still within a trial site)
- illness or incapacity of the child or parent
- inability of the parent to contact the school for enrolment purposes.

If the parent had not provided information about their school-age child's enrolment at the end of their compliance period, and no reasonable excuse or special circumstance exemption was applied, DHS attempted to contact the parent. Any parent who did not provide the required enrolment information when contacted was offered the service of a DHS social worker, including referral to any available support service if the social worker concluded that such a service was in the interests of the parent and/or the child. Given all these attempts, DHS would issue the parents failing to provide enrolment information with a formal enrolment warning notice specifying a 14 day period in which to comply.

#### Enrolment information exchange

Under the new enrolment process implemented in the NT and QLD in 2010, an enrolment information exchange was conducted between DHS and the education authorities prior to requesting details from in-scope parents. An enrolment information exchange process was conducted via an exchange of data between DHS and the education authorities to gather available enrolment details for SEAM children. This process required children who had been identified by DHS as in scope for SEAM to be matched to records held by the education authorities. Enrolment details for children who had been successfully matched to an education authority record was manually coded into the DHS database before enrolment notification letters could be sent to parents of those school-age children with no verified enrolment record. Enrolment notification letters were subsequently only sent to those

parents of children for whom no current enrolment record could be found, or who came into scope after the enrolment information exchange was performed.

If no current enrolment records were found during the bulk information exchange process, DHS sent enrolment notification letters to parents to advise them that they had 14 days to notify DHS of their child's enrolment details. Under SEAM legislation, parents who received an enrolment notification letter were required to provide enrolment details for their school-age children to DHS within 14 days, although SEAM policy guidelines allowed for an additional seven days from the date of issue where the enrolment notification letter was delivered via Australia Post. Remote sites under SEAM required hand-delivery of enrolment notification letters, which was dependent upon the frequency of DHS visits to the sites. Parents who failed to provide enrolment details by the end of the compliance period specified in the letter faced having their income support payments suspended if no reasonable excuse or special circumstance exemption applied to their situation.

When the SEAM trial began in QLD in January 2010, the enrolment information exchange was conducted once a year in Term 1 of the school year. From Term 3 of 2011, the frequency of the enrolment information exchange was changed to twice per year: once in Term 1 and once in Term 3. The second enrolment verification process later in the year was intended to capture the enrolment movement of students with high mobility.

### **Enrolment sanctions**

At the end of the 14 day compliance period, if the parent failed to provide enrolment details and:

- The parent was still subject to schooling requirements, and
- An enrolment notice was sent to the parent, and
- The parent had not provided a reasonable excuse, and
- No relevant special circumstance exemptions had been identified,

DHS issued the parent with a formal notice informing them their income support payment had been suspended under SEAM. Payment would be restored where a parent provided the required enrolment information, exited out of scope for SEAM or provided evidence of a reasonable excuse or special circumstance that prevented them from enrolling their child. If payment had been suspended for fewer than 13 weeks when it was restored, payments would have been back-paid in full. If parents had still not complied after 13 consecutive weeks of suspension, DHS would have reviewed the parent's circumstances to determine whether payment cancellation was appropriate.

## **Appendix 6: Attendance component of the SEAM trial**

### **Eligibility for the attendance component**

A child was in scope for the attendance component of SEAM if:

- They were in scope for the enrolment component, and
- They were enrolled at a SEAM-participating school.

If these conditions were met, the parent was in scope for the attendance component of SEAM in respect of that child.

In-scope parents were required to take reasonable steps to ensure their child was regularly attending school. If a child was not attending school regularly, the parent may have been referred to DHS and the suspension of income support payments may have occurred.

### **Attendance referral models**

The referral models under the attendance component of SEAM were operated differently in the NT and in QLD over the trial period, as shown in Table 6.1. In the NT, the referral of students was at the discretion of the school principal prior to 2010 and then an automatic referral model was used from 2010 till the end of the trial. In QLD the referral of students who were deemed to have unsatisfactory school attendance had always been at the discretion of school principals.

**Table 6.1: Summary of SEAM attendance referral process over the trial period**

#### **Northern Territory**

As discussed, the initial implementation of the attendance referral process in the NT in 2009 involved a discretionary process. The referral process was automated from 2010 by applying a pre-set attendance benchmark to automatically identify students with attendance problems.

##### *Discretionary approach*

If a child's attendance was considered by the school to be unsatisfactory and the school's local absenteeism interventions were not successful, the school could request DHS to assess whether the child's parent was in scope for the attendance component of SEAM.

If the school was still unsatisfied with the child's attendance after this eligibility check was performed, they could formally refer the parent to DHS for action under SEAM. If the parent was still in scope at the time of referral, DHS issued an attendance notice informing the parent of their responsibilities under SEAM and the possible consequences of not complying with the policy. The attendance notice specified a 28 day period in which the parent had to take reasonable steps to ensure their child's attendance at school improved. The compliance period could be extended if a reasonable excuse or special circumstance exemption was applied.

Typically, the school developed an Individual Attendance Plan (IAP) with the parent. This IAP set out the reasonable steps that the parent should undertake to address their child's poor attendance.

##### *Automatic referral*

From 2010, an automatic attendance referral model was implemented to replace the discretionary approach, and the Individual Attendance Plan was removed from the attendance referral process. The automatic attendance referral model was to apply the attendance benchmark at which action under the SEAM attendance component was activated. The benchmark referred to more than five unauthorised absences in a 10-week period (which equates to a 90 per cent or less attendance). The operation of the automatic referral model involved fortnightly attendance data exchange between

the participating schools and DHS via the NT education authorities. The first step of the process was to determine if the student with attendance issues was in scope for SEAM. Every fortnight, the list of students with unsatisfactory school attendance, as set by the attendance benchmark, was provided by the participating schools to the NT education authorities, which then transferred the data files to DHS for in-scope checks. Once the scope check was complete, DHS returned the list of in-scope students back to the NT DET and CEO which then forwarded the lists back to the relevant schools. The school then needed to inform DHS if families confirmed as 'in-scope' for SEAM had taken reasonable steps (as defined by the education authorities). Once receiving this information, DHS performed the final check to ensure parents in the list remained in-scope. In-scope parents who had not taken reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance were sent an attendance notice. Notified parents had 28 days to comply by improving attendance of their school-age child or taking reasonable steps to address their child's attendance issue. Notified parents might have been granted a reasonable excuse or special circumstance exemption if they faced difficulties or barriers.

### **Queensland**

In QLD, the referral of a student under the attendance component of SEAM was at the discretion of the school principal. No defined benchmark was used to determine what constituted unsatisfactory attendance in QLD. In addressing the attendance issues, schools often attempted to make use of school-based interventions as the preferred option, and SEAM was used as a last resort. Sometimes school principals decided to use SEAM as part of the suite of deterrent and rewarding schemes in place based on their understanding of the issue and their knowledge of the parent/family situation.

If the principal decided to make referrals under SEAM, the school would request DHS undertake the eligibility check of the child/parent. If a child was not identified as in-scope for SEAM, no further action was taken under SEAM. But if a child was identified as in-scope for SEAM and the attendance had not improved, the school would send an initial referral to DHS to request action be taken under SEAM.

Once school referral was received, DHS would undertake another SEAM eligibility check of the parents. If the parents remained in scope for SEAM, an attendance notice was issued, advising them that they had 28 days to comply by showing that they were taking reasonable steps in improving a child's attendance at school.

### **Attendance compliance and social work contact**

DHS offered social work support throughout a 28-day compliance period to assist parents in addressing attendance problems. Where an attendance notice was issued, the case was referred to the social worker by the Education Liaison Officer (ELO) of DHS. Within seven business days, DHS social workers were required to contact parents who received an attendance notice. The DHS social worker firstly conducted a file assessment by gathering information from the parent or basing the assessment on the information captured in the Social Work Information System (SWIS) managed by DHS.

When the contact was made, the social worker attempted to identify the barriers causing attendance issues. Further contact, assistance and referrals to other services were provided, if necessary and feasible, to help notified families overcome attendance barriers.

In assisting parents to comply with SEAM requirements, DHS social workers could also discuss with the third party (mainly the school), the circumstance the affected family may have faced. With barriers identified, referrals to relevant services were made where possible by social workers to deal with the issue.

The social work support, however, may not have occurred for the following reasons. Firstly, the social workers may have been unsuccessful in making contact for a variety of reasons. Secondly, customers were able to decline the offer of the DHS social work support if they had chosen not use this service.

### **Attendance suspensions**

At the end of the compliance period, attendance data was used in informing the compliance of notified parents. DHS social workers were also required to contact the relevant school to confirm whether or not the parent had taken reasonable steps or there was an improvement in their child's attendance. If there was no improvement in attendance or it was determined that the parent was not taking reasonable steps, DHS could suspend the parent's income support payment.

There was a range of options that DHS officers could recommend throughout the suspension period even if the parent was not yet compliant, such as providing appropriate support services through access to a social worker.

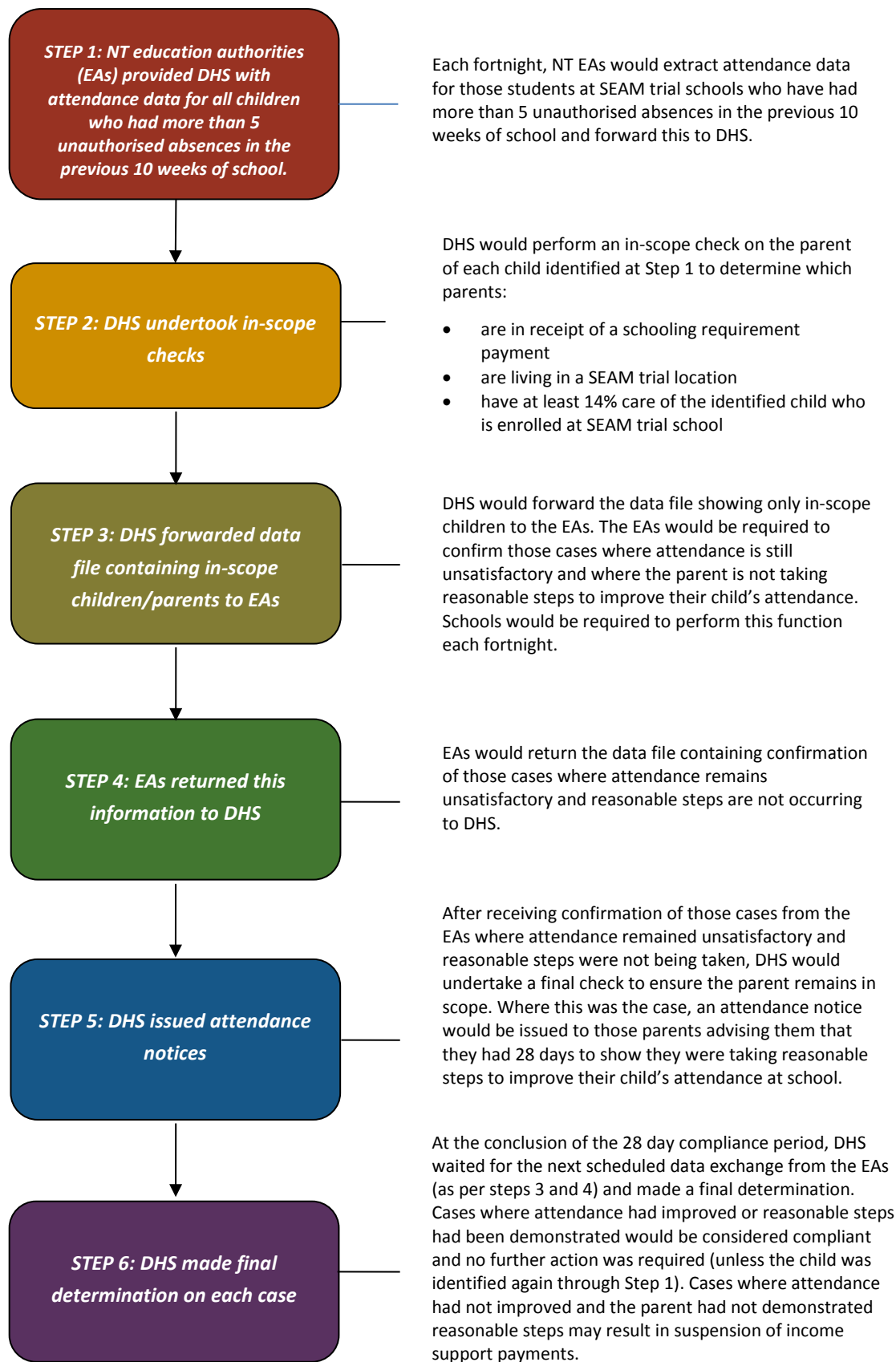
Parents whose payments were suspended, but subsequently complied with the attendance notice within 13 weeks from the date of suspension, had their payments back-paid in full. If parents had failed to comply with the attendance notice after 13 weeks of payment suspension under SEAM, they would have faced having their payments cancelled.

During the suspension period, DHS social work support may refer families onto support services such as receiving material aids where they were available in the community.



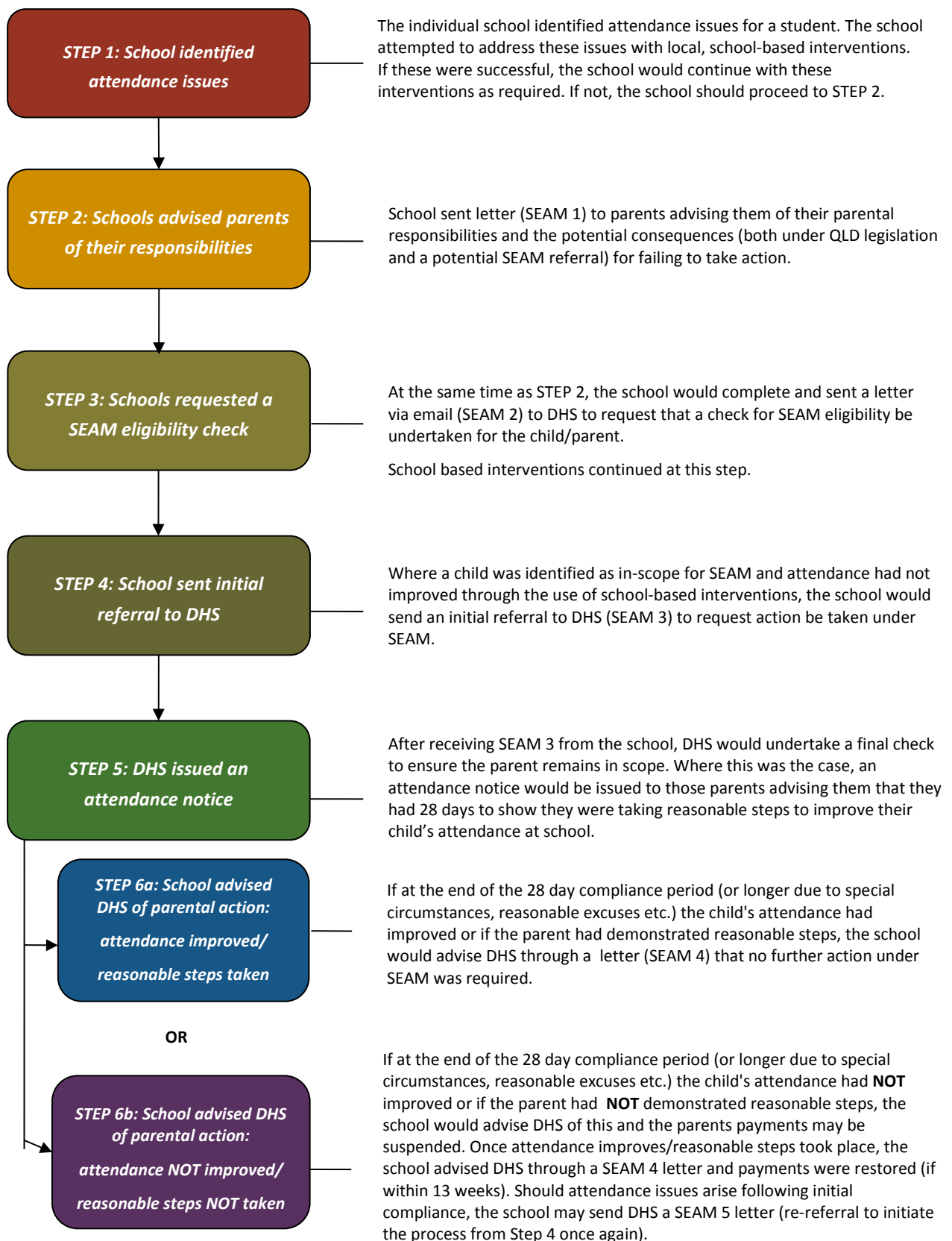
## Appendix 6a: Flow chart of SEAM attendance referral process (automatic referral) in the NT

### [Text alternative of NT SEAM attendance referral process Flow Chart](#)



## Appendix 6b: Flow chart of SEAM attendance referral process (discretionary referral) in QLD

### [Text alternative of QLD SEAM attendance referral flow chart](#)



## Appendix 7: Key policy timeline for the enrolment component of the SEAM trial

	NT sites	QLD sites
January 2009	Official commencement of enrolment component of SEAM trial – enrolment detail verification <b>once a year</b>	n/a
School Term 1, 2009	DHS sent all in-scope parents an enrolment notification letter which requested enrolment details for each of their compulsory school-aged children.	n/a
2009	As parents came into scope throughout the year, the enrolment notification letter was sent.	n/a
January 2009	Enrolment component of SEAM trial continued in the NT – enrolment detail verification <b>once a year</b>	Official commencement of enrolment component of the SEAM trial – enrolment detail verification <b>once a year</b>
School Term 1, 2010	New enrolment process – a enrolment information exchange was conducted between DHS (DHS) and the education authorities prior to requesting details from parents. Enrolment notification letters were subsequently only sent to those parents of children for whom no current enrolment record could be found, or who came into scope after the enrolment information exchange was performed.	
January 2011	Enrolment detail verification <b>once a year</b>	Enrolment detail verification <b>twice a year</b>
School Term 1, 2011	A enrolment information exchange was conducted between DHS and the education authorities	
School Term 3, 2011	n/a	A second enrolment information exchange
January 2012	Enrolment information exchange <b>once a year</b>	Enrolment information exchange <b>twice a year</b>
School Term 1, 2012	A enrolment information exchange was conducted between DHS and the education authorities	
30 June 2012	Completion of the SEAM trial	

### Appendix 8: Key policy timeline for the attendance component of the SEAM trial

	NT sites	QLD sites
January 2009	Official commencement of attendance component of the SEAM trial	n/a
January 2009 ~ September 2009	Two attendance notices were issued to SEAM parents related to attendance problem of their child – an initial warning notice reminding parents that they had responsibility for their child’s school attendance, and a second notice formally requiring compliance with attendance requirements under SEAM	n/a
October 2009	The initial warning notice was removed from the process.	Official commencement of attendance component of the SEAM trial
2009	An <i>Individual Attendance Plan</i> was included as part of the attendance referral process	n/a
2009	Attendance referral was at the discretion of the school principals.	
2010	The <i>Individual Attendance Plan</i> was removed from the attendance referral process	Attendance referral was at the discretion of the school principals.
June 2010 ~ June 2012	Automated fortnightly attendance information exchange was introduced – a benchmark of unsatisfactory school attendance was set as more than five unauthorised absences in the previous ten weeks of school.	
30 June 2012	Completion of the SEAM trial	

## **Appendix 9: Theory of Change for the SEAM trial**

The Theory of Change for the SEAM trial was developed as a theoretical framework to guide evaluation through the identification of key elements of the SEAM trial which may affect the effectiveness of the trial. An explanation for each of the key elements, categorised by ‘reasons for change’, ‘resources for change’ and ‘pathway to influencing behaviour change’, is presented below.

### **1. REASONS FOR CHANGE**

#### **School attendance and education attainment**

School enrolment and attendance, as the basic requirement for education engagement, is essential for achieving desirable education outcomes in the long term. Failure to attend school<sup>59</sup> regularly poses a risk for school-age children that would jeopardise their personal development from the stages of childhood to young adulthood.

Failure to attend school long enough (time) or often enough (regularity) to gain basic skills and knowledge has personal and social costs. School absenteeism negatively relates to attainment and is associated with disruptive behaviour, and hence leads to poor education outcomes. Unemployment, poverty, homelessness and minor or gross criminal activity has been linked to absenteeism (Withers 2004). This in turn leads to a negative cycle of intergenerational welfare effects, which increases the likelihood of welfare dependency and intergenerational disadvantage (House of Representatives 1996).

A variety of research studies<sup>60</sup> have shown that non-attendance or lower levels of school attendance are associated with low socioeconomic status, Indigenous status and remoteness. School attendance is found to be lowest among low income families and where parents and communities are not engaged with the school and school staff.

Data also reveal that the average attendance rate is almost invariably lower for Indigenous students than for their non-Indigenous counterparts (COAG 2013), regardless of whether the student is in a primary or secondary school, or whether the student is in a government or an independent school (DEEWR 2001).

School absences may be legitimate and permitted, defined as ‘authorised absences’, for such reasons as ill health, holidays, suspension or approved withdrawals for family functions. Poor attendance may also be deemed ‘unauthorised’ or not sanctioned when absences from school are unexplained, un-notified or unacceptable. Reasons behind these two broad categories of absenteeism are often noticeably different, which present different dimensions in framing policies to address the issue. The ‘unauthorised absence’ is the policy focus for the SEAM trial. As ‘unauthorised absence’ is largely due to illegitimate reasons, it is likely to have a more detrimental effect on a student’s education engagement and social behaviour.

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<sup>59</sup> This excludes those receiving home schooling.

<sup>60</sup> For example, DEEWR (2008), “National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training”; the AIHW Closing the Gap Clearing House (2010), “School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students”.

## **Parental effort and education attainment**

The literature suggests that a combination of risk factors (personal, family, school, community and society, and demographic) are associated with school absenteeism (Withers 2004). These are a set of complex interrelated factors which affect a student's education engagement. Parental efforts, however, have been identified as the most prominent in effectively encouraging and supporting education compared to all other factors.

Empirical analysis by De Fraja *et. al.* (2010) has differentiated and quantified the effect of effort from parents, students and schools on education attainment, and confirmed that parental effort has the largest effect. The main channel identified through which parental socioeconomic background affects achievement is via effort. The propensity of children to exert effort is not influenced by their social background but by the effort their parents put into their education.

According to the study, the positive support through parental effort not only encourages students to work harder but also schools to work harder. This, in turn, is cyclical, encouraging parents to maintain effort with corresponding positive schooling. The study implies that policies aimed at influencing parental efforts might be more effective in strengthening education attainment, compared with policies attempting to modify their social background such as addressing poverty and housing issues or improving the socioeconomic status. In the context of the SEAM trial, the parental effort is primarily reflected in the form of ensuring school enrolment and regular school attendance of their school-age children.

In recognising the potential effect of parental effort on students' education attainment, it is also necessary to recognise that some parents may face complex and multiple barriers which thwart their attempts to comply with schooling requirements. Policies designed to encourage parental efforts, therefore, equally need to address these barriers by providing sufficient support services. The role of support services for the SEAM trial is discussed in Section 6.3.

## **Linking conditions to income support payments**

Conditional welfare links welfare entitlement with a certain activity requirement, and the loss of the entitlement may occur as a consequence of non-compliance. The fundamental change through the use of conditionality in welfare has signified an implicit form of social contract that underlies the welfare system (Penman 2006). This policy shift has been largely driven by the change in ways of understanding social problems, in particular, welfare dependency and poverty. It is understood that adverse circumstances are in part caused by people's choices and lifestyles. It is, therefore, believed that conditional welfare tends to reinforce socially responsible behaviours and hence promote favourable outcomes (Griggs and Evans 2010).

In Australia, as with other welfare states, conditionality was implemented by making income support payments subject to job-search activity tests. In recent years, some important policy developments have included extending welfare conditionality from work-related requirements to non-work behaviours in the field of education, health and child support (Griggs and Evans 2010).

In the SEAM context, the *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Amendments) 2008 Act* provides legislative effect to linking schooling requirements to welfare entitlements. This aims at encouraging parents' taking responsibility for ensuring enrolment and attendance of their school-age children. The SEAM trial measure focuses on parental efforts in relation to students' schooling outcomes.

SEAM attempted to be an effective motivator to address non-enrolment and unauthorised absenteeism issues. It was designed as a family support measure and a deterrent strategy. As an integrated part of the measure, social work contact was offered by DHS to support families and work together with schools and communities to sustain the attendance of the child. Suspension of welfare payments under SEAM was the last resort. Welfare payments were never suspended in isolation from a full understanding of the situation of the family, and were only suspended where there was no evidence of reasonable steps being made.

## **2. RESOURCES FOR CHANGE**

### **Role of communication on influencing behavioural change**

From a public policy perspective, the role of communication was to engage relevant parties with information and consult on the need for change. Based on 'Rational Choice Theory', it is assumed that if people were provided with information, they would act on it in such a way as to maximise personal benefit and minimise the potential cost (APSC 2007).

Through consulting and raising awareness of the intended outcomes and procedures involved in the SEAM trial, individuals, families and communities were provided with opportunities to understand and accept the motivation of the trial. As part of the communication process, individuals and families needed to be informed about how the implementation of the trial might have an impact and what assistance would be in place. "...Most people will readily comply with authority they consider to be legitimate" (APSC 2007). Understanding and accepting the incentives and drivers of the trial is a precursor to behavioural change.

The process of communicating the intention of the trial in the community could have potentially drawn on the influential local social networks. Once the message reached and was accepted by the broader community, there was a greater chance that the changed behaviour as a result of the trial was perceived to become the social norm over time. Effective communication needed to recognise cultural and demographic differences among communities. This required resources to be directed to consulting and tailoring information and messages specifically to meet the information needs of different communities.

From an implementation point of view, the SEAM trial involved the interactions among the Australian government, state and territory governments, education authorities and participating schools. It was also necessary to have effective communication strategies in place to ensure the exchange of information and respond to feedback in a timely manner.

Communicating the SEAM trial messages was the first step towards influencing behavioural change rather than an end point. But this was an intensive part of building the case for change and it required effective communication, reaching out and consulting with all relevant stakeholders.

### **IT infrastructure for data exchange**

According to the findings from the School Attendance Project conducted by Access Economics (2009), one of the key elements for successful programmes aimed at improving school attendance is ongoing tracking of student attendance records. The availability of real time enrolment and attendance data would allow issues to be identified appropriately and actions to be taken quickly.

For the SEAM trial, the provision of timely data was essential in meeting legislative requirements and administrative needs for its implementation. This included data for enrolment verification, scope

checking (if the child is in scope for SEAM), reporting attendance issues (for those reaching the unauthorised absence benchmark), and for decisions on SEAM actions (such as issuing notices/payment suspensions).

The data exchange for the SEAM trial was a data driven process with a purpose to automate the referral and decision-making process. This process involved Australian departments (mainly DHS), education authorities and participating schools. One of the roles of the DHS was to manage the administration of the SEAM customer database and to link income support recipient data to school data.

Resources therefore were required to build the IT infrastructure that supported data transfer, data linkage and data verification across agencies in a real time manner. This was not provided as part of the funding.

### **Role of support services in the conditional welfare**

Conditional welfare reflects a 'social contract' approach which defines the right to receive income support payments as well as the obligation/condition associated with this right. People in receipt of income support payments, however, are in general disadvantaged groups who are likely to face complex and multiple barriers in complying with the conditional requirements.

In a review of the literature about welfare payments and behaviour change, Penman (2006) considered a number of evaluations of social programmes where welfare receipt was conditional on children's satisfactory school attendance. The programmes were implemented in the US around the late 1980s. The review showed that programmes used sanctions alone did not improve school attendance. In contrast, positive effects were found when programmes combined sanctions with case management and supportive services. The conclusion drawn from the review was that the success of an intervention associated with punitive measures required support services to be an integral part of the intervention.

For the SEAM trial, the provision of social work contact by DHS was a crucial component for achieving its intended outcomes. The feature of supportive services under the trial was consistent with its objectives. The trial had a focus on providing assistance and the punitive measure was only considered as a last resort. The social work contact under SEAM was intended to address barriers parents may have experienced in relation to their child's attendance. It was designed to provide direct contact with affected families within 7 days of a notice being issued as a result of SEAM, and to identify barriers and address problems. The DHS social work contact also played a role in engaging with schools and communities, and making additional referrals for affected families to other support services.

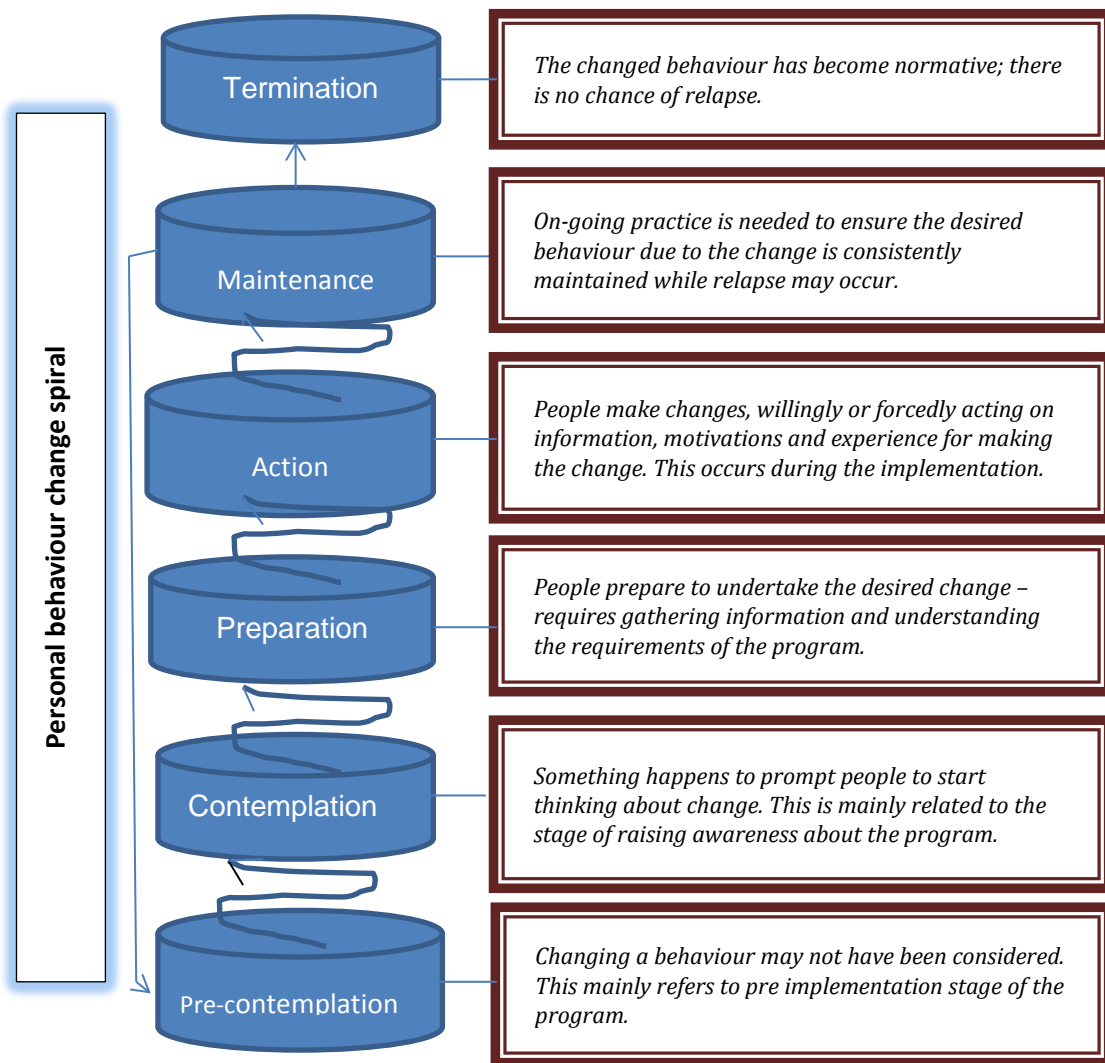
## **3. PATHWAY TO INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR CHANGE**

### **Theory of behaviour change – 'Stages of Change' Model**

In order to influence behaviour, particularly as part of tackling complex policy problems, it is essential to understand the key determinants of behaviour. As pointed in APSC (2007), '...how people behave is determined by many factors and is deeply embedded in social situations, institutional contexts and cultural norms'. Given this complexity in attempting to change people's behaviour, Prochaska and Di Clemente (1986) have identified that behaviour change occurs in stages and that the movement through these stages is not linear, but rather cyclical, as shown in Figure 9.2.



Figure 9.2: Spiral of Stages of Change Model



Source: Darton (2008)

In the Stages of Change Model, Prochaska and Di Clemente (1986) have shown a periodic pattern of contemplation, action, maintenance and relapse in the course of behaviour change. This behaviour model demonstrates that it is likely that people will move back and forth between different stages of change for some time, and experience one or more periods of relapse (i.e. resuming the old behaviour). Even with successful behaviour change, Prochaska and Di Clemente (1986) point out that relapse to earlier stages is likely to occur. But people are unlikely to remain within the same stage to which they have regressed if on-going practice to encourage changes has been in place. Over time, the change in people's behaviour may be observed through the spiral upwards movement along each stage until the changed behaviour is mostly observed at the maintenance stage or has become normative.

Prochaska and Di Clemente's Stages of Change model has received support in the research literature. It is considered to have relevance for understanding, among other things, patterns of activity and participation leading to behaviour change (Darton 2008). Further work undertaken and reported by Prochaska et al (1992) also suggested that behaviour change can only take place in the context of an

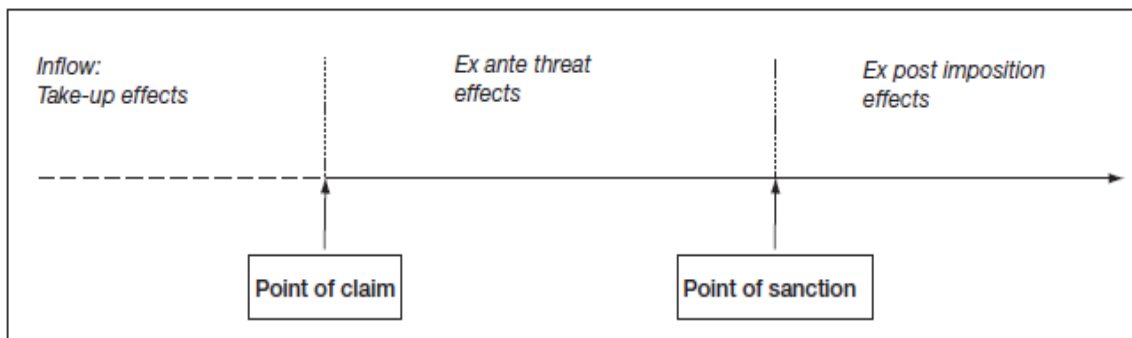
enabling or supportive environment. This again confirms the importance of social work support as a built-in feature for the SEAM trial.

### Threat effect of conditional welfare

Within a conditional welfare system, the sanction impact could arise at various points of implementation related to take-up of entitlements, compliance period and post imposition of sanction, as illustrated in Figure 9.3. Take-up effects occur due to the increase in the 'compliance cost' of receiving the benefit which may affect eligible individuals' decision about taking up the entitlement. Threat effects may result from the presence of sanctions in the system or warnings welfare recipients received for non-compliance. Imposition effects are those directly brought about by a sanction.

Sanction effects may be either intended or unintended. But sanction by itself has never been the purpose of SEAM; rather, it aims to work as the final enforcement step to influence change leading to favourable behaviour in the longer term. In this sense, the threat effect is a greater agent to invoke behaviour change than the actual sanction itself.

Figure 9.3: Timing of sanction effects



Source: Griggs and Evans 2010

Sanction effects are generally seen as key to changing the culture of the welfare system as they help influence welfare recipients' choice about their behaviour. This is particularly true when considering recipients' underlying perception of consequences. That is '... the mere existence of sanctions will change behaviour, without the need to impose more than necessary to demonstrate the validity of the threat' (Griggs and Evans 2010). This is also in line with the nature of the SEAM approach which aims at a behavioural change through a multi-faceted approach instead of focusing and purely relying on a punitive effect.

In response to a sanction, empirical studies show that most welfare recipients would either comply and remain on the programme, or not comply and remain on the programme (on reduced support) (Griggs and Evans 2010). Those who are sanctioned, however, are generally the most disadvantaged who may face multiple barriers in complying with the requirements. Therefore, the effectiveness of sanctions not only depends on the individual reaction but also on the support services provided as an integrated part of the measure to address barriers.

### Barriers to addressing school attendance issues

One of the crucial principles for effective behavioural change is to identify and remove barriers people may experience. Existing barriers to behavioural change provide an explanation as to why people perceive they can't or don't want to change their behaviour. Where people experience

complex and multiple barriers, identifying and removing those barriers needs to be part of a wider assistance package available to those affected. If these barriers are not addressed, sustained or widespread behavioural change is unlikely to take place.

For school attendance issues, it is believed that ‘... a combination of home, school and individual factors contributes to students’ absence from school’ (AHIW 2010). It is also understood that there are major social, historical and systemic factors as well as culturally based factors affecting the school attendance (Access Economics 2009).

It is likely that barriers to poor attendance are strongly related to family circumstances, education environment and attitudes towards education in general. For example, poor parental attitudes to school likely result in poor attendance of the student. Poor teaching and failure to engage students is likely to impede a student’s motivation in attending school.

Indigenous students were reported to have a much lower rate of school attendance than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>61</sup> Poor attendance by Indigenous students may be attributed to a number of culturally based reasons (Access Economics 2009). For example, interruption to schooling may be caused by prominent cultural activities (such as funerals) in Indigenous communities. For students in remote areas, they may be cut off from access to school during the wet season. Due to the highly transient nature of Indigenous families, it is not unusual that Indigenous students are enrolled in multiple schools during the school year. It has also been found that children from remote communities have particular problems when they move on to high school as this generally means relocation to large towns or cities where they have no friends and no family support. Cultural isolation of these students has been noted as a factor in poor attendance or dropping out of school altogether.

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<sup>61</sup> COAG Reform Council (2013), “Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance”.

## **Appendix 10: Evaluation related reporting for the SEAM trial**

The SEAM trial commenced in January 2009 in the NT and October 2009 in QLD, and a range of qualitative and quantitative analysis and annual evaluations have been conducted.

### **2010 SEAM Evaluation Report**

The focus of the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report was to estimate the progress made in achieving desired outcomes in 2010. The effectiveness of the enrolment and attendance components of the trial was assessed in both the NT and QLD. Given the later implementation of the trial in QLD compared to that in the NT, this evaluation also reviewed the implementation of the trial in QLD. The evaluation was finalised in January 2012, and was publically released on 2 February 2012.

### **2011 SEAM Process Review**

As a result of the findings from the 2009 SEAM Evaluation Report, an internal process review was conducted at the beginning of 2011. The review examined how the SEAM trial had progressed since implementation, with specific focus on the existing operational processes and a review of the new attendance referral process which commenced in the NT in July 2010.

### **2009 SEAM Evaluation Report**

An evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of the SEAM trial in the NT in 2009 was conducted at the end of 2010. The evaluation incorporated qualitative fieldwork conducted by URBIS in the NT in 2009. The evaluation sought to review the implementation of SEAM and the ongoing process at the trial sites in the NT and an early assessment of the effectiveness of SEAM. The evaluation was finalised in January 2011, and was publically released on 16 December 2011.

### **Telephone interviews: QLD Logan area, May-June 2010**

A telephone interview survey was conducted by the Social Research Centre (SRC) to collect data from SEAM parents in the Logan area in QLD. The in-house analysis of the data was undertaken by the SEAM evaluation team in the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The purpose of the study was to understand parents' views on their child's schooling, their attitude toward SEAM and their perceived understanding of the possible consequences of SEAM. The findings from this analysis have been incorporated into the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report.

### **Face-to-face interviews: QLD Logan area, May-June 2010**

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by SRC to collect in-depth data from SEAM families, school principals, DHS staff and QLD DET staff. Also one two-hour focus group was held with community workers in Logan. The purpose of the research was to supplement the available administrative data which was being used to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the SEAM trial. The findings from this analysis have been incorporated into the 2010 SEAM Evaluation Report.

### **URBIS qualitative fieldwork: NT, April-May 2009**

Qualitative data were collected by URBIS from parents/caregivers subject to the SEAM trial, community leaders, DHS (Centrelink) staff, principals and teachers, education authority staff in the NT. The purpose of the fieldwork was to explore the perspectives and experience of individuals,

organisations and community stakeholders related to the SEAM trial in the NT. The findings from this analysis have been incorporated into the 2009 SEAM Evaluation Report.

## Appendix 11: Summary statistics of selection of comparison schools

### Northern Territory

#### Katherine site

Primary school and secondary school	SEAM schools		selected comparison schools	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
total enrolment (2011)	296	138	114	76
ICSEA <sup>62</sup>	821	130	733	148
attendance rate (2011)	86%	0.05	77%	0.16
teaching staff	24	14	11	9
Indigenous students	48%	0.28	69%	0.37

#### Hermannsburg & Wallace Rockhole site

Primary school and combined school	SEAM schools		Selected comparison schools	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
total enrolment (2011)	103	103	60	26
ICSEA <sup>49</sup>	617	55	562	58
attendance rate (2011)	70%	0.10	74%	0.09
teaching staff	10	9	7	3
Indigenous students	100%	0.01	100%	0.00

#### Tiwi islands site

Primary school	SEAM schools (2)		selected comparison schools	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
total enrolment (2011)	61	8	62	37
ICSEA <sup>49</sup>	576	1	576	45
attendance rate (2011)	88%	0.06	75%	0.15
teaching staff	9	2	8	2
Indigenous students	99%	0.01	97%	0.05

<sup>62</sup> ICSEA refers to Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage Score.

### NT CEO schools

Primary school and secondary school	SEAM schools		selected comparison schools	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
total enrolment (2011)	264.25	145.66	388.33	509.96
ICSEA <sup>49</sup>	672	179.21	724.33	240.93
attendance rate (2011)	72%	13%	73%	13%
teaching staff	21.25	10.24	40	48.75
Indigenous students	75%	33%	63%	45%

### Logan sites

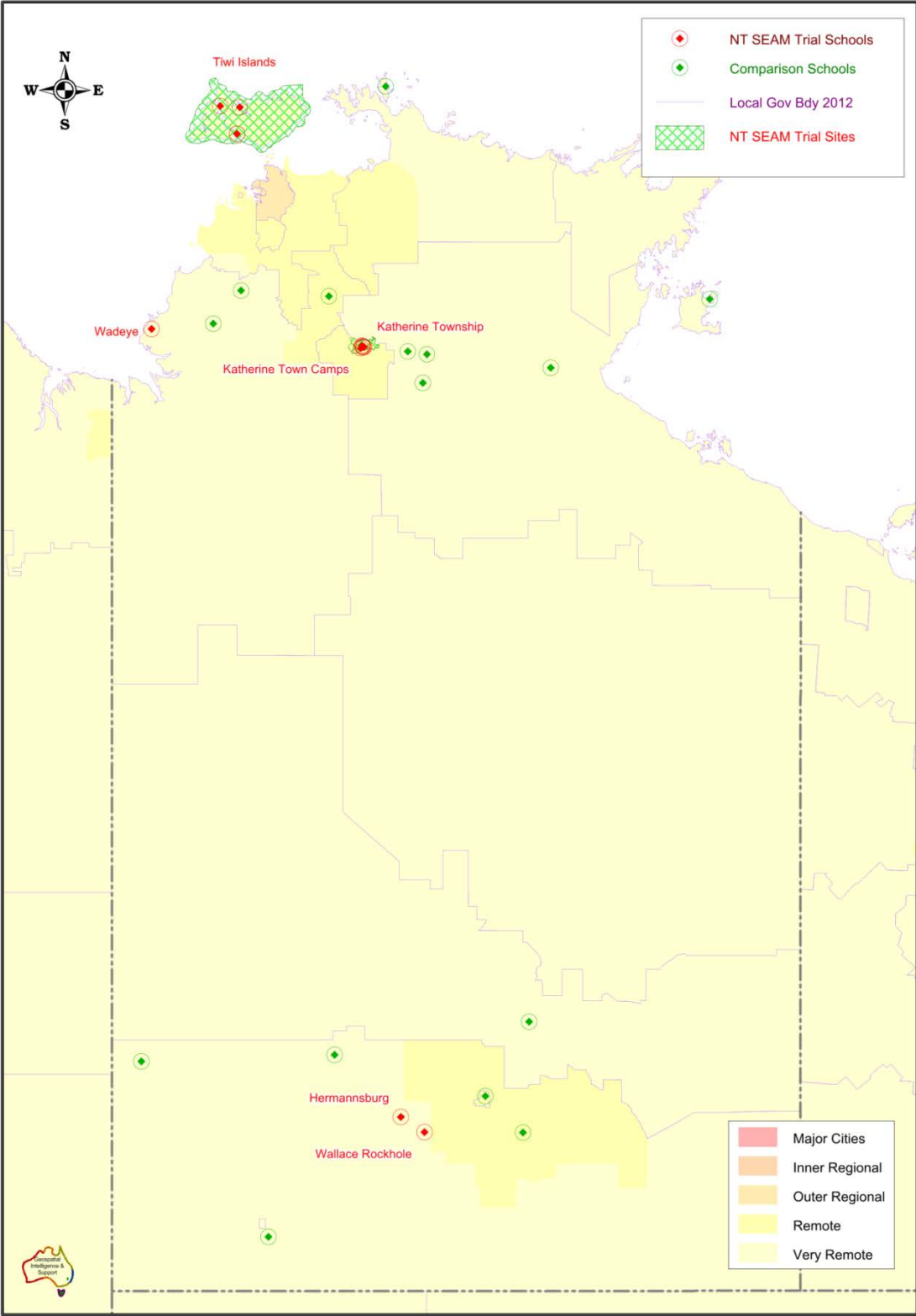
Primary school	SEAM schools		selected comparison schools	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
total enrolment (2011)	578	214	653	200
ICSEA <sup>49</sup>	934	41	960	24
attendance rate (2011)	91%	0.01	92%	0.01
teaching staff	50	18	49	11
Indigenous students	8%	0.04	5%	0.01

Secondary school	SEAM schools		selected comparison schools	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
total enrolment (2011)	911	424	972	103
ICSEA <sup>49</sup>	925	15	960	21
attendance rate (2011)	87%	0.02	87%	0.02
teaching staff	87	31	82	7
Indigenous students	8%	0.03	4%	0.01

### North Queensland (remote sites)

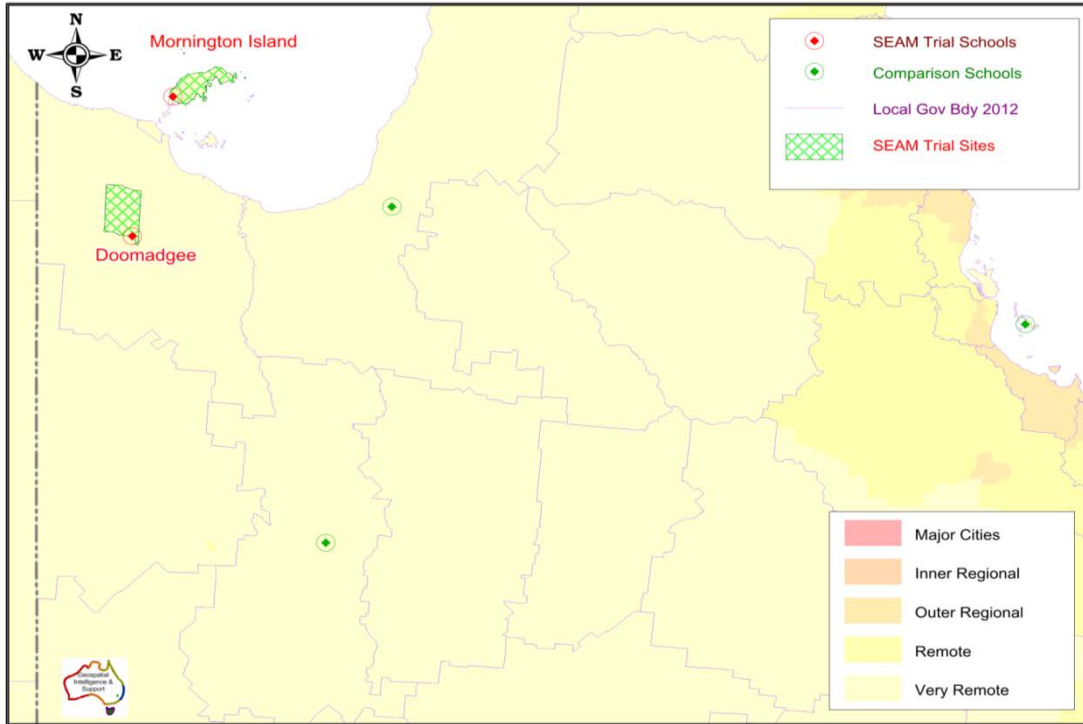
Combined Primary and secondary school	SEAM schools		selected comparison schools	
	mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
total enrolment (2011)	319	23	270	72
ICSEA <sup>49</sup>	589	18	663	97
attendance rate (2011)	64%	0.08	76%	0.09
teaching staff	27	4	23	5
Indigenous students	97%	0.02	80%	0.25

**Appendix 12: Map of SEAM and comparison schools in the NT**

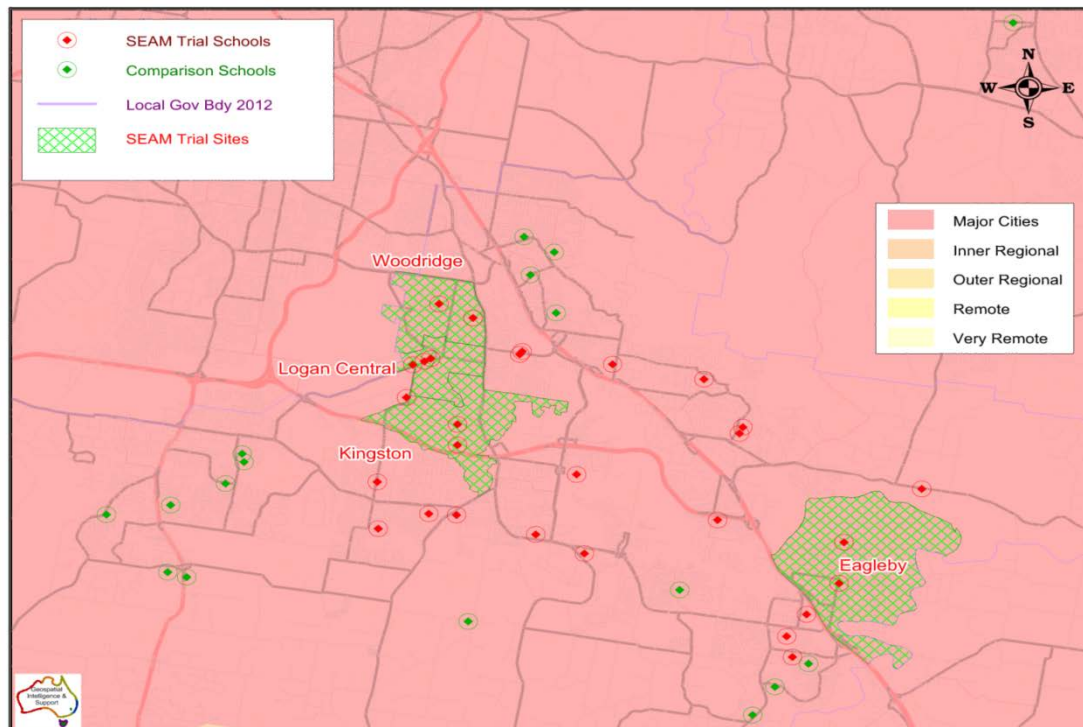




### Appendix 13: Map of SEAM and comparison schools in North (remote) QLD



### Appendix 14: Map of SEAM and comparison schools in Logan, QLD



## **Appendix 15: Quasi-experimental methodology for the SEAM trial evaluation**

### **What is quasi-experimental approach in evaluation?**

The question central to the final evaluation of the SEAM trial is whether the trial had an impact on school attendance of children whose parents were subject to the SEAM schooling requirements for receiving income support payments.

To measure its impact, the trial was framed as an experiment with SEAM students forming the treatment group and non-SEAM students forming the comparison group. This enabled the counterfactual to be examined by considering what would have happened in the absence of the trial. By comparing the outcome measure for individuals in the treatment group and comparison group, this approach was used to measure the average effect of the trial on the outcome measure for the treated population. The approach is referred to as the *quasi-experimental method*, as opposed to a *randomised experiment* where the treatment group and comparison group are randomly assigned.

### **What is the difference-in-differences estimation (DiD)?**

The quasi-experimental approach is applied to a non-randomised experiment (trial) where a comparison group is identified as ‘...mimicking the properties of the control group in the properly designed experiment context’ (Blundell and Dias 2000). The difference-in-differences (DiD) method was used in this evaluation to estimate the effect of the trial, by calculating the difference in the average outcome before and after the trial for the treatment group (referred to as D1) and for the comparison group (referred to as D2), and then comparing the difference between D1 and D2.

The idea behind this method is that the change in the relevant outcome for the treatment group (D1) may be caused by a range of ‘local’ and ‘macro’ factors such as policy measures including SEAM, whereas the change for the comparison group (D2) would be affected by ‘local’ and ‘macro’ factors but not be attributable to the SEAM trial. Therefore, estimated changes in D1 and D2 have differenced out ‘local’ factors. By assuming that D2 captures changes as a result of ‘macro’ conditions (e.g. introduction of state legislation) that are also common to the treatment group, the difference between D1 and D2 thus measures the effect of the trial, i.e. eliminating the non-SEAM effects.

### **Treatment group and comparison group for the SEAM trial**

For the impact evaluation for the SEAM trial, the treatment group includes students who were subject to SEAM during the trial period, and while the comparison group is constructed to include students who would have been subject to SEAM had they resided in the trial sites and attended participating schools during the trial period.

The construction of the comparison group was a two-step process. The first step was to select comparison schools in the NT and QLD which were similar to SEAM schools, in relation to a range of factors such as school ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) score, total enrolment, attendance rate, year range, Indigenous status and remoteness.

The second step was to apply the SEAM criteria (except for the location requirement) to a list of DHS customers who would have been included in SEAM should they have resided in the trial sites. Then the student data for these customers was linked to the student data provided by education authorities in the NT and QLD.

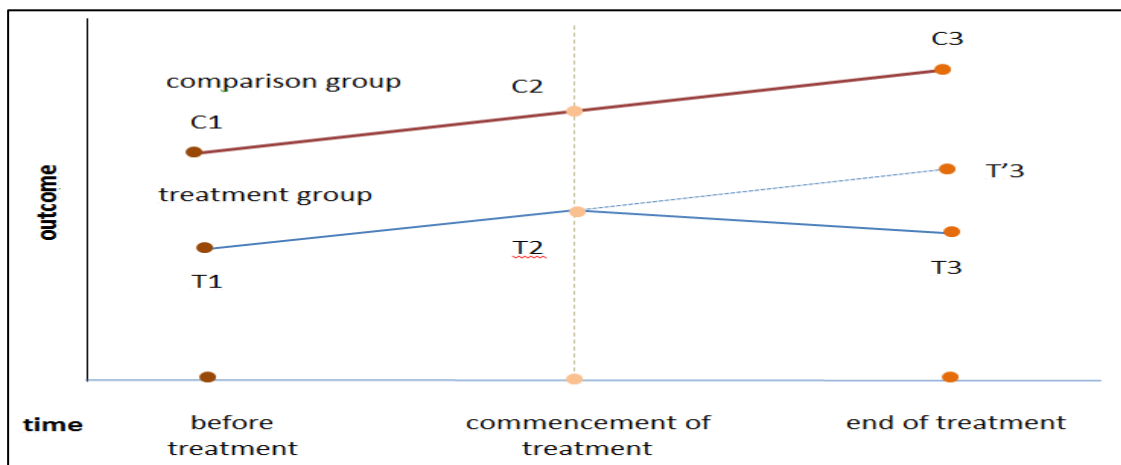
Note that the impact analysis focused on analysing attendance where linked attendance records were available for students in the treatment group and comparison group.

### Identifying assumption for DiD

The DiD estimation was based on strong identifying assumptions. In particular, the conventional DiD estimator required that, in the absence of the treatment, the average outcome for the treatment and comparison groups would have followed parallel paths over time (Alberto 2005).

The following diagram illustrates the DiD assumption. Upon the commencement of the treatment, the trend in the outcome of study between the treatment and comparison groups is observed to be in parallel in spite of a systematic difference in the outcome (C1C2 and T1T2). And the underlying trend would have continued the same in the absence of the treatment (C1C3 and T1T'3). The observed change in the trend for the treatment group (T2T3) during the treatment period is therefore attributed to the treatment (T3-T'3).

The parallel trend assumes that both the treatment and comparison groups are subject to common 'macro' conditions, while the systematic difference in the outcome between the treatment and comparison groups may be caused by the difference in 'local' conditions.



For the SEAM trial evaluation, as shown in the trend analysis (Section 8.2.2), the common trend assumption is validated where the trend in the rate of unauthorised absences generally points to the same direction for SEAM and comparison students over 2008-2012 despite the different starting levels. The almost parallel trend over the trial period (except that the magnitude of the change was noticeably different mostly in the first year of the trial) was likely to replicate the pre-trial trend.

Note that it was not ideal when the very different starting level of unauthorised absences was observed for the SEAM and comparison students. However, from a methodological viewpoint, as long as the common trend assumption holds, the DiD in the report is a valid approach.

### DiD in a regression framework – model specification

The attendance issue of concern in the trial is unauthorised absence. Therefore the rate of unauthorised absence is the outcome of study in DiD estimation. A balanced panel data was used in the analysis where the model is a regression of the difference of the outcome measures (i.e. rate of unauthorised absences) at time  $t$  and time  $t-1$  on the treatment effect.

In a regression framework for DiD estimation, the underlying model for the panel data is of the following form (Cobb-Clark and Crossley 2003, page 500):

$$\text{Equation (1.1): } y_{it}^j - y_{i,t-1}^j = \alpha + \beta d_t^j + (\varepsilon_{it}^j - \varepsilon_{i,t-1}^j)$$

To control for individual characteristics that are heterogeneous to the outcome variable (i.e. rate of unauthorised absences may vary for students of different age), the model is of the form:

$$\text{Equation (1.2): } y_{it}^j - y_{i,t-1}^j = \alpha + \beta d_t^j + \delta x_i + (\varepsilon_{it}^j - \varepsilon_{i,t-1}^j)$$

To account for heterogeneity in the treatment effect for subgroups (e.g. families with different characteristics may respond differently to the trial), the model is of the form:

$$\text{Equation (1.3): } y_{it}^{jk} - y_{i,t-1}^{jk} = \alpha + \alpha_1^j d_t^j + \beta d_t^{jk} + \delta z_i^k + (\varepsilon_{it}^{jk} - \varepsilon_{i,t-1}^{jk})$$

In all equations above, the regression coefficient  $\beta$  is to estimate the treatment effect for the treated. The details of DiD estimation in a regression frame are described in Meyer (1995) and Cobb-Clark and Crossley (2003) and Buckley and Shang (2003).

Note that:

- The difference between Eq 1.1 and Eq 1.2 is that additional factors (X) are included in Eq 1.2 to account for demographic factors (such as age) and family circumstances (such as being in a persistently jobless family or parent having a reported medical condition). As a result, the composition of students is accounted for in measuring the treatment effect.
- The difference between Eq 1.2 and Eq 1.3 is that, in Eq 1.2,  $x_i$ 's are included as an independent variable and the estimated coefficient for  $x_i$ 's was  $\delta$ ; but in Eq 1.3, the subgroup as identified by a  $x_i$  is on the interaction term (in  $d_t^{jk}$ ) and the estimated coefficient was  $\beta$ , which is the treatment effect of the subgroup of interest (i.e. a particular family circumstance). In Eq 1.3, other  $x_i$ 's (other than the  $x_i$  included in the interaction term) are also included as independent variables and are defined as  $z_i^k$  dummy indicators.

Notation:

$y_{it}^j$	outcome measure (i.e. rate of unauthorised absence) for every unit $i$ at each time period $t$ ( $t=1$ for the trial period and 0 otherwise), $j=1$ if in the treatment group and 0 otherwise
$y_{it}^{jk}$	outcome measure (i.e. rate of unauthorised absence) for every unit $i$ at each time period $t$ ( $t=1$ for the trial period and 0 otherwise), $j=1$ if in the treatment group and 0 otherwise, $k=1$ if in the sub group of interest (e.g. jobless family) and 0 otherwise
$y_{i,t-1}^j$	outcome measure (i.e. rate of unauthorised absence) for every unit $i$ at each time period $t-1$ ( $t=1$ for the trial period and 0 otherwise), $j=1$ if in the treatment group and 0 otherwise
$y_{i,t-1}^{jk}$	outcome measure (i.e. rate of unauthorised absence) for every unit $i$ at each time period $t-1$ ( $t=1$ for the trial period and 0 otherwise), $j=1$ if in

	the treatment group and 0 otherwise, k=1 if in the sub group of interest (e.g. persistently jobless family) and 0 otherwise
$x_i$	Additional covariates accounting for heterogeneity in the outcome measure (e.g. age, gender, Indigenous status) for every unit $i$
$z_i^k$	Additional covariates related to family circumstances for every unit $i$ at each time period $t$ ( $t=1$ for the trial period and 0 otherwise), $k = 1$ if in the sub group of interest (e.g. persistently jobless family)
$d_t^j$	indicator variable, coded 1 if $t=1$ and $j=1$ , 0 otherwise
$d_t^{jk}$	indicator variable, coded 1 if $t=1$ , $j=1$ and $k=1$ , 0 otherwise
$\beta$	Average treatment effect of the trial on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences
$\varepsilon_{it}^j$	error term for each unit $i$ at each time period $t$ , for each group $j$
$\varepsilon_{it}^{jk}$	error term for each unit $i$ at each time period $t$ , for each group $j$ , and for each subgroup $k$
$\varepsilon_{i,t-1}^j$	error term for each unit $i$ at each time period $t-1$ , for each group $j$
$\varepsilon_{i,t-1}^{jk}$	error term for each unit $i$ at each time period $t-1$ , for each group $j$ , and for each subgroup $k$

Note that the ordinary least squares estimator is employed in the regression, which is sensitive to the usual violations of the Gauss-Markov assumptions (such as homoscedasticity, normality, and no autocorrelation).

## **Appendix 16: Data sources for the SEAM trial evaluation**

### **Enrolment and attendance data from state and territory education authorities**

Education authorities collected enrolment and attendance data for students attending SEAM schools. This data contained individual student enrolment start/end dates, school, year level, demographic information (age, sex) and (where available) exit dates, destination school and reasons for ending the enrolment episode. This data also included a daily attendance rate for each student along with an absence reason where applicable.

At the end of the school year, education authorities provided historical daily enrolment and attendance data to the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Education authorities also provide attendance data to DHS through a fortnightly data exchange process.

The former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) required enrolment and attendance data for students who were subject to SEAM, for non-SEAM students who were enrolled in SEAM schools and for students in non-SEAM schools. Where possible, this data was linked to DHS administrative data. Data was required from participating education authorities from the period 2008-2012. Participating education authorities include the NT DET, NT CEO and QLD DETE.

### **Australian Department of Human Services (DHS) administrative data**

DHS administrative data was extracted from the Research and Evaluation Dataset (RED) maintained by the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). This dataset contained information on payment history (including supplements), customer demographics, and other associated information gathered by DHS which was required to administer payments to customers. RED also contains specific monthly extracts of SEAM data including SEAM activities and dates.

### **Commissioned and in-house qualitative research**

Social Research Centre (SRC) was commissioned by the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to undertake a qualitative study of people affected by SEAM in QLD, including parents, school staff, DHS officers, staff from QLD DET, and other community members with a professional role in SEAM. Fieldwork was conducted in April-June 2010 with the aim of gathering information relating to:

- the implementation of the SEAM trial in QLD
- the effectiveness of SEAM and its outcomes in QLD
- views held by all groups of stakeholders in QLD, including parents, principals, community workers, DHS (Centrelink) and QLD DET employees relating to SEAM.

SRC also conducted a survey of parents living in the Logan area (south-east QLD) who had at least one compulsory school-aged child in order to explore particular issues, including parents' attitudes towards their children's schooling and SEAM.

The interim SEAM evaluation team conducted qualitative interviews during May 2011 to obtain feedback on the operation and effectiveness of existing SEAM attendance and enrolment processes. A number of stakeholder groups were canvassed, including DHS staff from a number of

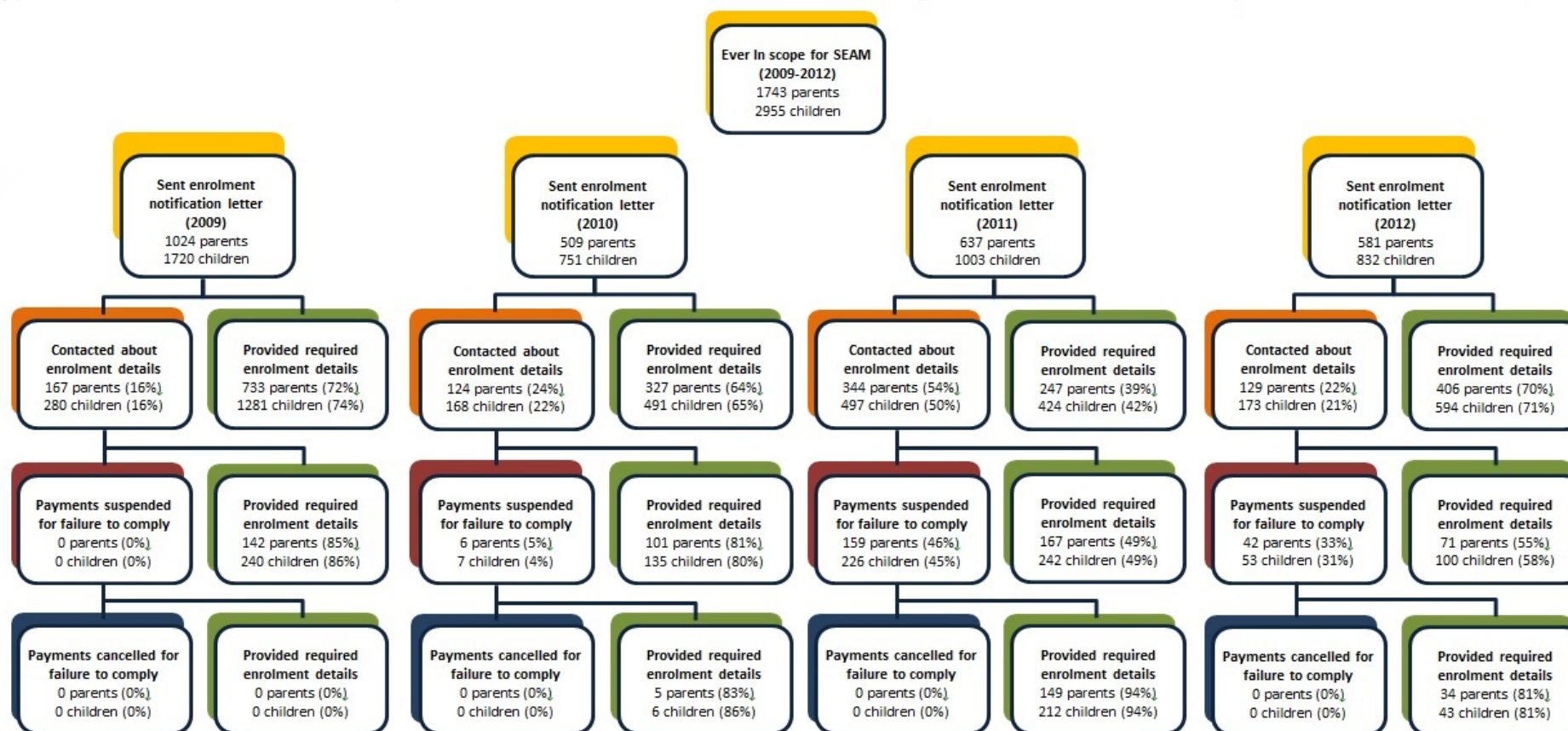
area offices, representatives from schools and education authorities in the NT and QLD, staff from the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and DHS social workers.

The SEAM evaluation team also conducted field visits during March and April 2013. Qualitative information was collected by interviewing principals from four selected schools in NT sites and three SEAM schools in the Logan sites, and staff from NT DET and QLD DETE.

#### **Programme Administrative data**

Programme administrative data was provided in the form of monitoring data on a weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis. The weekly monitoring reports prepared by DHS provided information on compliance with SEAM requirements and an individual-level case report on attendance notices issued. The fortnightly exchange for attendance in the NT provided student demographic information (age, sex, etc.), enrolment details, whether the parents were taking reasonable steps and unauthorised absence information for students who were in scope for the attendance component and met the defined benchmark for poor attendance. Additionally, SEAM general administrative data including all activities and dates was extracted monthly from the DHS database.

## Appendix 17: Cumulative number of parents and children who reached different stages of SEAM enrolment component over 2009 to 2012, NT

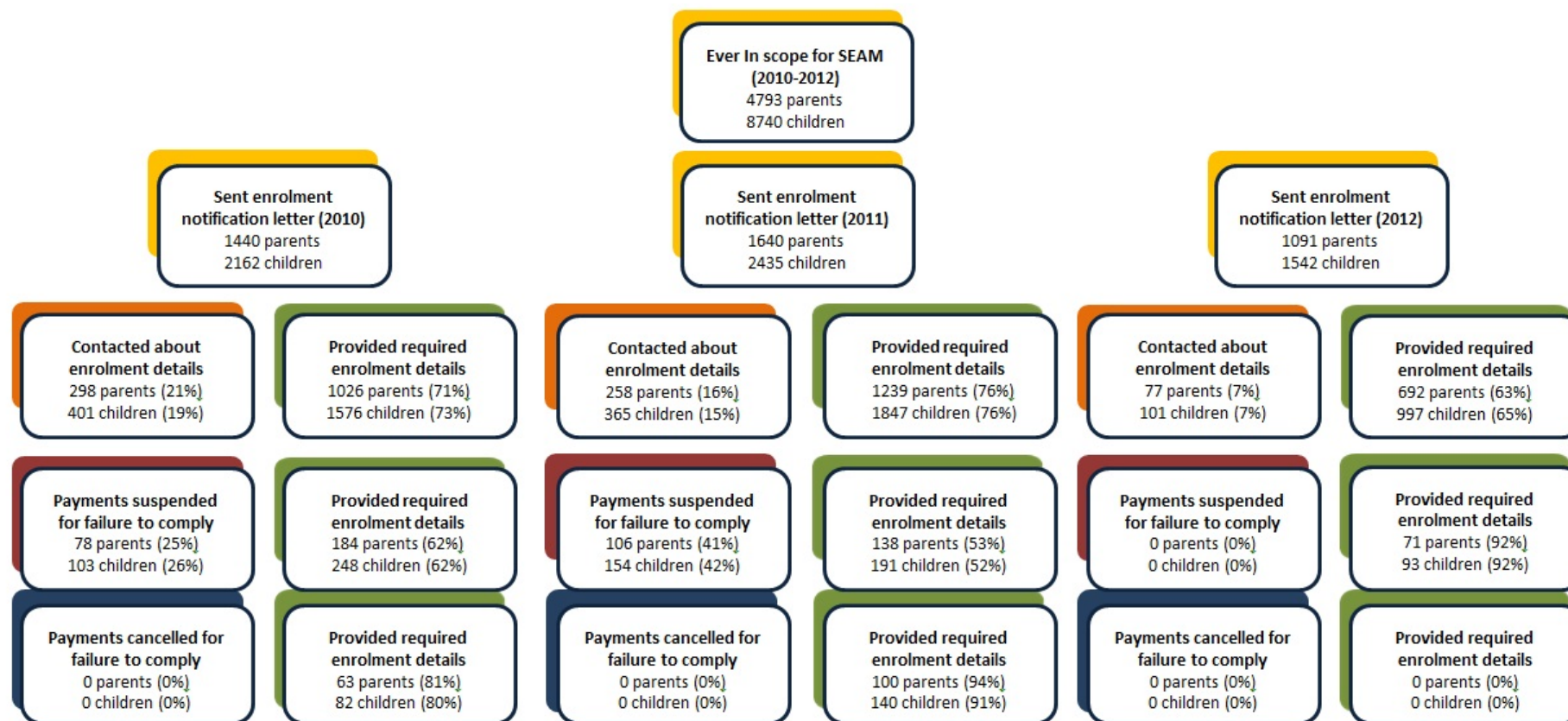


Source: DHS administrative data

Note: Percentages are calculated in reference to the stage immediately prior and may not add to 100 since the figures of those whom no further action taken or went out of scope were excluded. The parents and children may be subject to multiple notices.



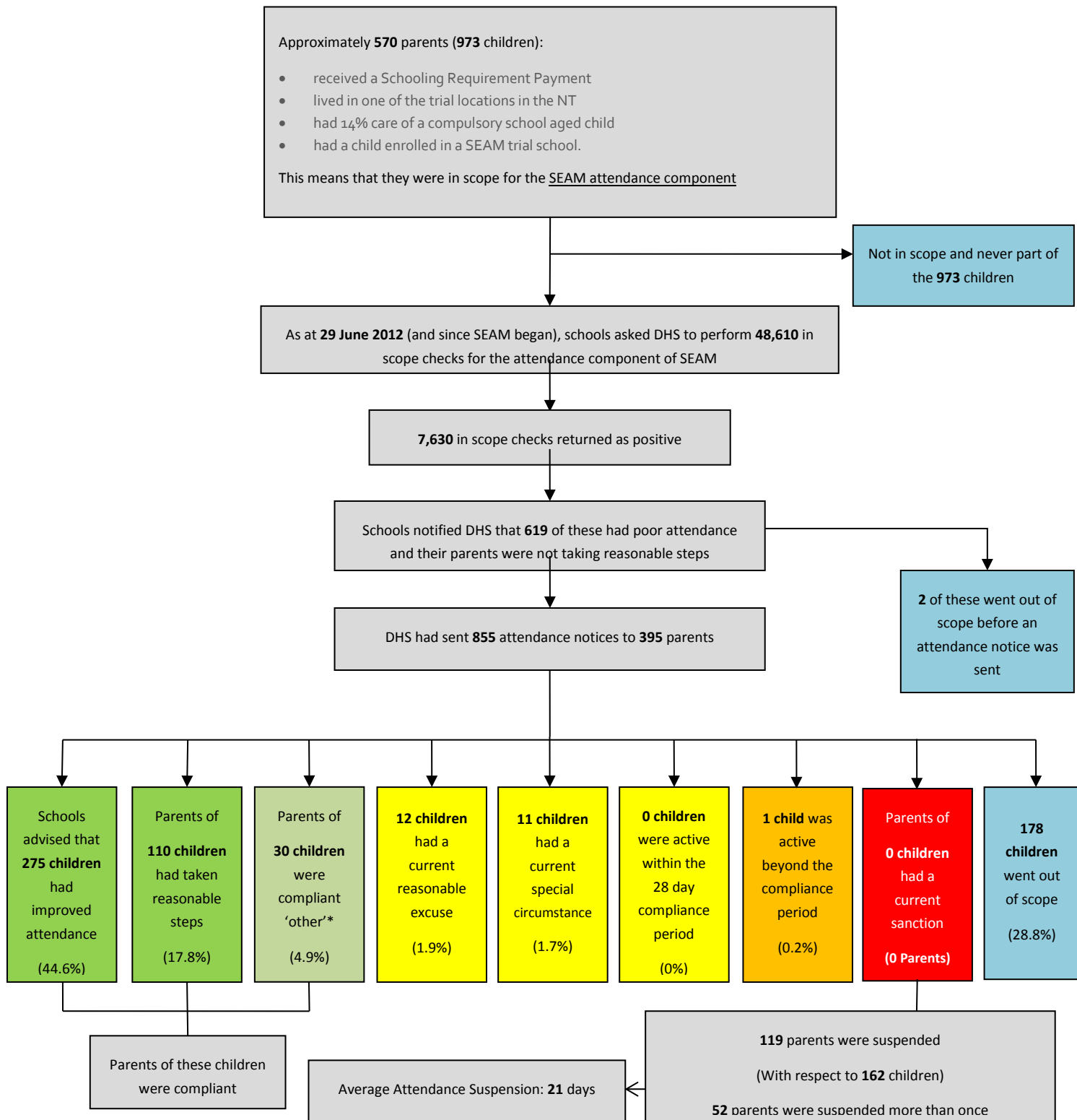
**Appendix 18: Cumulative number of parents and children who reached different stages of SEAM enrolment component over 2010 to 2012, QLD**



Source: DHS administrative data extracted

Note: Percentages are calculated in reference to the stage immediately prior and may not add to 100 since the figures of those whom no further action taken or went out of scope were excluded. The parents and children may be subject to multiple notices.

## Appendix 19: Attendance monitoring data (as at 29 June 2012), NT



[Text alternative of attendance monitoring data \(as at 29 June 2012\), NT](#)

## Appendix 20: Attendance monitoring data (as at 29 June 2012), QLD



[Text alternative of attendance monitoring data \(as at 29 June 2012\), QLD](#)

## **Appendix 21: Additional case studies on social work contact using SWIS information**

### **Case study 1, very remote site, NT**

The DHS customer subject to SEAM was first referred to the social worker in May 2010. At the first social work contact, the social worker explained to the customer about SEAM requirements, and discussed barriers identified as having an impact on school attendance. One child was refusing to attend school due to chronic shyness, and the other child was fearful of attending school due to the local community violence which extended to the school yard. The customer sought social work assistance to engage with the school in understanding and addressing her children's individual needs. The social worker and the customer jointly explored strategies to encourage and support her children's school attendance. One option was for the customer to attend school with the second child in order to help him to overcome shyness in the class. The social worker also provided the customer with direct contact details of the social worker and discussed the assistance from local support services for the family.

The social worker maintained contact with the customer through meetings at the service centre, and ongoing social work support to the customer remained in place as needed. While the customer remained engaged with the social worker, the social worker suspected that the information provided was not totally correct. The social worker encouraged the customer to be factual about her children's school attendance, and to make efforts to comply with SEAM requirements. The customer confirmed her understanding of the SEAM policy and that she was confident that she could improve her children's attendance over the following five weeks.

The social worker had ongoing weekly contacts with the customer since November 2011. The customer regularly initiated contact with the social worker to discuss her children's school attendance. It was confirmed by the school that the customer had been making consistent and substantial efforts to ensure regular school attendance for all of her children.

### **Case study 2, very remote site, NT**

The DHS customer subject to SEAM was first referred under SEAM in May 2010. The social worker explained and delivered the enrolment notice to the customer and also discussed school attendance for one child. The follow up occurred in May 2011, when the social worker conducted an in-office interview to undertake an assessment and determine if there were any barriers affecting the child's school attendance. The customer did not appear open to discuss strategies to improve her child's attendance and was reluctant to seek support from the social worker. The customer's income support payments were suspended under SEAM due to an unsatisfactory level of school attendance of one child.

During the compliance period, the customer advised the social worker on the impact of recent family bereavement and also disclosed that she was residing with her two sisters, their partners and their children in overcrowded accommodation. By acknowledging the impact of the recent bereavement on family functioning and the customer's capacity to meet SEAM obligations in the short term, the social worker recommended a special

circumstance exemption period, and provided counselling and support following the family's bereavement.

Given the customer's disclosure, the social worker identified unstable home circumstances as a possible barrier that may have an impact on her child's school attendance. In particular, that cousins who resided in the same house not attending school was an issue. It was also of concern that the customer may lack consistent engagement with the school. The social worker reinforced SEAM obligations with the customer, and encouraged her to discuss any difficulties she may experience with the school. Payments were reinstated at the end of the compliance period.

The social worker continued to meet with the customer to address the attendance issue of her child. The social worker explained that payments were at risk of being suspended again given her child's non-attendance. During the social work contact, no disclosure of any special circumstances or existing barriers were identified which may affect the ability to comply with SEAM. The customer again appeared reluctant to engage with the social worker, the school, and other support services.

The customer's income support payments were suspended under SEAM for the second time as a result of her child missing school on Thursdays and Fridays. The customer disclosed that the child was too tired to go to school those days. The social worker explained that that was not a satisfactory reason to miss school, and advised of reasonable steps required to improve the child's attendance.

The social worker assessment concluded that the customer did not appear to have any existing barriers affecting her ability to meet SEAM obligations. The social worker continued to offer assistance and support, but the customer remained reluctant to engage and declined any further social work assistance.

### **Case study 3, very remote site, QLD**

The DHS customer subject to SEAM was referred in relation to attendance issues for her two school-aged children in December 2010. It was noted by the social worker that '... the customer appeared intoxicated and showed little interest or comprehension in what was discussed'. Being unable to engage with the customer prevented the social worker from clearly identifying existing barriers. The social worker had followed up with the school about any barriers the family experienced and any supports that were provided. Without being able to clearly identify barriers, the social worker recommended payment not be suspended and special circumstances be applied to the customer, as it was considered that the payment suspension would place the family in severe hardship and potentially exacerbate barriers already present in the family unit.

At the time when the special circumstances exemption expired, the social worker recommended the special circumstances exemption be re-applied as barriers had still not been clearly identified or addressed, and appropriate referral options had not been sourced. The social worker made the field visit and contacted the customer to establish rapport and to develop an understanding of barriers affecting school attendance. The customer advised that children often slept over with extended family and that had an impact on their

schooling and ability to attend school. The social worker was informed that the school had a policy which assisted parents to get the children to school. But both children often remained non-compliant. The social worker encouraged the customer to ensure her children slept at home to assist in school attendance, and liaised with the school to encourage its outreach to the family. The social worker made use of a strength-based approach to encourage the customer to continue to work with the school. Information received afterwards from the school was that one child had increased school attendance.

In a later visit, one child was reported to have continued improving attendance, while the other child was reported to have behaviour issues and continued to experience difficulties in engaging with school. The customer advised that the children alternated between two houses which continued to affect school attendance. With agreement from the customer, the social worker made further referral to an alternative support agency which enabled the support worker to attend the home in the morning to assist with the non-compliant child attending school. The social worker recommended the reasonable excuse exemption be applied for the non-compliant child while the support agency made attempts to engage with the child and support his school attendance. The strength-based approach was in place with the social worker acknowledging successes made by the parent in increasing the child's engagement with school and school attendance. The social worker's positive relationship with the customer had assisted the customer to stay engaged and to maintain a good relationship with all stakeholders.

## **Appendix 22: Definition of 'reasonable steps' taken by parents**

'Reasonable steps' defined by each education authority are:

### **Northern Territory Department of Education and Training**

- Take appropriate steps/actions to ensure that the child/children are ready for school each day e. g. they are not too tired to attend school.
- Take appropriate action to ensure the child arrives at school on time each day.
- Notify the school immediately when the child/children will be late or not attending and provide a valid reason.
- Engage with the school to develop and implement strategies to improve student attendance.

### **Northern Territory Catholic Education Office**

- Engage directly with the school to develop strategies to improve their child's attendance.
- Advise the school immediately about student absences, including proposed absences from school.
- Ensure their child engages with school support services.

### **Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment**

- Make appropriate arrangements for the transport of the child to and from school each day including any specific requests by the school e. g. requiring child to be brought to the classroom each day by parent.
- Establish appropriate routines to encourage regular school attendance, e.g. they are not too tired to attend school.
- Obtain appropriate uniforms and provisions to attend school.

## [Appendix 23: Text alternative of Appendix 6a: Flow chart of SEAM attendance referral process \(automatic referral\) in the NT](#)

STEP 1: NT education authorities (EAs) provided DHS with attendance data for all children who had more than 5 unauthorised absences in the previous 10 weeks of school.

Each fortnight, NT EAs would extract attendance data for those students at SEAM trial schools who have had more than 5 unauthorised absences in the previous 10 weeks of school and forward this to DHS.

STEP 2: DHS undertook in-scope checks. DHS would perform an in-scope check on the parent of each child identified at Step 1 to determine which parents:

- are in receipt of a schooling requirement payment
- are living in a SEAM trial location
- have at least 14% care of the identified child who is enrolled at SEAM trial school

STEP 3: DHS forwarded data file containing in-scope children/parents to EAs. DHS would forward the data file showing only in-scope children to the EAs. The EAs would be required to confirm those cases where attendance is still unsatisfactory and where the parent is not taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance. Schools would be required to perform this function each fortnight.

STEP 4: EAs returned this information to DHS. EAs would return the data file containing confirmation of those cases where attendance remains unsatisfactory and reasonable steps are not occurring to DHS.

STEP 5: DHS issued attendance notices. After receiving confirmation of those cases from the EAs where attendance remained unsatisfactory and reasonable steps were not being taken, DHS would undertake a final check to ensure the parent remains in scope. Where this was the case, an attendance notice would be issued to those parents advising them that they had 28 days to show they were taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance at school.

STEP 6: DHS made final determination on each case. At the conclusion of the 28 day compliance period, DHS waited for the next scheduled data exchange from the EAs (as per steps 3 and 4) and made a final determination. Cases where attendance had improved or reasonable steps had been demonstrated would be considered compliant and no further action was required (unless the child was identified again through Step 1). Cases where attendance had not improved and the parent had not demonstrated reasonable steps may result in suspension of income support payments.



## [Appendix 24: Text alternative of Appendix 6b: Flow chart of SEAM attendance referral process \(discretionary referral\) in QLD](#)

STEP 1: School identified attendance issues. The individual school identified attendance issues for a student. The school attempted to address these issues with local, school-based interventions. If these were successful, the school would continue with these interventions as required. If not, the school should proceed to STEP 2.

STEP 2: Schools advised parents of their responsibilities. School sent letter (SEAM 1) to parents advising them of their parental responsibilities and the potential consequences (both under QLD legislation and a potential SEAM referral) for failing to take action.

STEP 3: Schools requested a SEAM eligibility check. At the same time as STEP 2, the school would complete and sent a letter via email (SEAM 2) to DHS to request that a check for SEAM eligibility be undertaken for the child/parent. School based interventions continued at this step.

STEP 4: School sent initial referral to DHS. Where a child was identified as in-scope for SEAM and attendance had not improved through the use of school-based interventions, the school would send an initial referral to DHS (SEAM 3) to request action be taken under SEAM.

STEP 5: DHS issued an attendance notice. After receiving SEAM 3 from the school, DHS would undertake a final check to ensure the parent remains in scope. Where this was the case, an attendance notice would be issued to those parents advising them that they had 28 days to show they were taking reasonable steps to improve their child's attendance at school.

STEP 6a: School advised DHS of parental action: attendance improved/reasonable steps taken. If at the end of the 28 day compliance period (or longer due to special circumstances, reasonable excuses etc.) the child's attendance had improved or if the parent had demonstrated reasonable steps, the school would advise DHS through a letter (SEAM 4) that no further action under SEAM was required.

OR

STEP 6b: School advised DHS of parental action: attendance NOT improved/reasonable steps NOT taken. If at the end of the 28 day compliance period (or longer due to special circumstances, reasonable excuses etc.) the child's attendance had NOT improved or if the parent had NOT demonstrated reasonable steps, the school would advise DHS of this and the parents payments may be suspended. Once attendance improves/reasonable steps took place, the school advised DHS through a SEAM 4 letter and payments were restored (if within 13 weeks).

Should attendance issues arise following initial compliance, the school may send DHS a SEAM 5 letter (re-referral to initiate the process from Step 4 once again).

[Appendix 25: Text alternative of Appendix 19: Attendance monitoring data \(as at 29 June 2012\), NT](#)

1. Approximately **570** parents (**973** children):
  - received a Schooling Requirement Payment
  - lived in one of the trial locations in the NT
  - had 14% care of a compulsory school aged child
  - had a child enrolled in a SEAM trial school
2. This means that they were in scope for the SEAM attendance component
3. As at 29 June 2012 (and since SEAM began), schools asked DHS to perform 48,610 in scope checks for the attendance component of SEAM.
4. 7,630 in scope checks returned as positive.
5. Schools notified DHS that 619 of these had poor attendance and their parents were not taking reasonable steps (2 of these went out of scope before an attendance notice was sent).
6. DHS had sent 855 attendance notices to 395 parents.
  - Schools advised that 275 children had improved attendance (44.6%). Parents of these children were compliant
  - Parents of 110 children had taken reasonable steps (17.8%). Parents of these children were compliant.
  - Parents of 30 children were compliant 'other'\* (4.9%). Parents of these children were compliant.
  - 12 children had a current reasonable excuse (1.9%).
  - 11 children had a current special circumstance (1.7%).
  - 0 children were active within the 28 day compliance period (0%).
  - 1 child was active beyond the compliance period (0.2%).
  - Parents of 0 children had a current sanction (0 Parents). [119 parents were suspended (With respect to 162 children). 52 parents were suspended more than once. Average Attendance Suspension: 21 days]

**Appendix 26: Text alternative of Appendix 20: Attendance monitoring data (as at 29 June 2012), QLD**

1. Approximately 1,681 parents (2,796 children):
  - received a Schooling Requirement Payment
  - lived in one of the trial locations in QLD
  - had 14% care of a compulsory school aged child
  - had a child enrolled in a SEAM trial school
  
2. As at 29 June 2012 (and since SEAM began), schools asked DHS to perform 699 in scope checks for the attendance component of SEAM.
  
3. 394 in scope checks returned as positive.
  
4. Schools notified DHS that 187 of these had poor attendance and their parents were not taking reasonable steps (12 of these went out of scope before an attendance notice was sent).
  
5. DHS sent 204 attendance notices to 127 parents.
  - Schools advised that 57 children had improved attendance (32.5%). Parents of these children were compliant.
  - Parents of 26 children had taken reasonable steps (14.9%). Parents of these children were compliant.
  - Parents of 7 children were compliant 'other'\* (4.0%). Parents of these children were compliant.
  - 1 child had a current reasonable excuse (0.6%).
  - 14 children had a current special circumstance (8.0%).
  - 8 children were active within the 28 day compliance period (4.8%).
  - 0 children were active beyond the compliance period (0.0%).
  - Parents of 0 children had a current sanction (0 Parents). [3 parents were suspended (with respect to 6 children) - Average Attendance Suspension: 44 days. Longest Attendance Suspension: 64 days]
  - 62 children went out of scope (35.4%)