

Systems to Improve Student Attendance in Northland School Division

Education and Childcare

Report of the Auditor General
December 2025

**Assessment of
Implementation Report**



Brandon Lundy, MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

On behalf of my office, I am transmitting the *Systems to Improve Student Attendance in Northland School Division Assessment of Implementation* to the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, under the *Auditor General Act*.



W. Doug Wylie FCPA, FCMA, ICD.D
Auditor General of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta
December 2025

Outstanding Recommendations

Assessment of Implementation Report

Systems to Improve Student Attendance in Northland School Division

Education and Childcare

(March 2015)

Summary of Recommendations

IMPLEMENTED Recommendation:
Northland School Division—Develop a plan to improve student attendance

IMPLEMENTED Recommendation:
Northland School Division—Monitor and enforce student attendance

IMPLEMENTED Recommendation:
Department of Education and Childcare—Oversight by the department

Introduction

We completed our assessment of implementation of three recommendations from our March 2015 audit of the *Systems to Improve Student Attendance in Northland School Division*. We found that all three recommendations have been implemented. We previously reported on the progress of these recommendations in 2018.¹

This assessment of implementation is not intended to determine whether the Northland School Division (the division) will be successful in achieving its student attendance goal. The division does not anticipate reaching its target of 80 per cent of students regularly attending school² until 2031.

Our assessment is whether the division implemented recommended processes which are effective in facilitating progress toward its short- and long-term student attendance goals. We expect the Department of Education and Childcare (the department) to continue overseeing the division as it fully executes its attendance improvement plan, holding it accountable for delivering on both its immediate and future goals.

¹ *Systems to Improve Student Attendance in Northland School Division Progress Report, Report of the Auditor General—February 2018*, pages 1-11.

² Regular attendance is attending at least 80 per cent of the school year. Students under this level are identified as chronic non-attendeess.

Recommendation:

Northland School Division—Develop a plan to improve student attendance

IMPLEMENTED

Context

The priority of Alberta’s kindergarten-to-grade 12 (K-12) education system is the success of every child in school. Regular school attendance is critical to student success. Poor school attendance has been a significant and long-standing challenge in the division. Without a plan to guide its efforts and actions, the division may not succeed in sustaining student attendance improvements.

In 2015, we recommended that the division develop an operational plan with short- and long-term targets to include:

- measurable results and responsibilities
- a prioritized list of student-centred strategies, initiatives, and programs
- documentation of the costs and resources required to action the strategies, initiatives, and programs
- a specific timeline for implementation
- reporting on progress and accountability for improved attendance results

Our current findings

The division implemented the recommendation by developing a detailed attendance improvement operational plan, executing its strategies, and regularly analyzing attendance information to improve student attendance results. Since making our recommendations in 2015, the percentage of students regularly attending division schools has increased from 66 per cent to 71 per cent in 2024.

The operational plan is comprehensive and incorporates the essential elements of an effective plan including goals, targeted actions, key activities, lead person, timelines, short-term targets, and performance measures. The plan is updated annually based on actual prior year results. Division senior management use the plan to track progress and periodically report performance outcomes to the department and to the division’s board of trustees.

Early versions of the plan specified short-term targets but not the division’s long-term goal of achieving 80 per cent of students regularly attending school by the 2030–2031 school year. Management corrected this in the 2024–2025 school year plan so that results can be evaluated against both current and long-term attendance goals.

The plan has measurable objectives with targets, focusing on a range of student-centred initiatives designed to more actively engage students. These include assigning community liaison workers within each school to support students, conducting home visits by family wellness workers to meet with parents and chronic non-attending students; and organizing activities such as student improvement draws and celebrations, theme weeks, and cultural learning opportunities. The division supported culturally responsive approaches to encourage good student attendance—for example, the division hosted community engagement meetings and met with the Elder and youth councils to receive feedback.

Management analyzes the results for each measure and documents the reasons why targets were achieved or missed. The individuals responsible for executing the key activities to achieve the desired outcomes are clearly identified in the plan. The plan clearly specified the resources necessary, both human and financial, to achieve the desired outcomes.

The division's *2024–2027 Education Plan* includes the long-range goal of 80 per cent student regular attendance in short-term increments of at least 1.5 per cent each year. Results analysis for this measure was included in the division's publicly reported *2023–2024 Annual Education Results Report*. This analysis covered division-wide attendance trends, explained variances, and included a table comparing monthly attendance rates by school year. The learnings from the past were incorporated in a section summarizing the next steps to support the division's *2024–2027 Education Plan*.

In addition to annual reporting, division management regularly reported attendance information to the board of trustees and the department. Reporting included issues affecting attendance rates, such as community bereavements, wildfires, and water outages.

Recommendation:

Northland School Division—Monitor and enforce student attendance

IMPLEMENTED

Context

The division's superintendent is ultimately responsible for ensuring students attend school and is accountable to the division's board of trustees. In our 2015 audit, we found several problems, including:

- a lack of guidance or training for staff managing attendance
- neither school administrators nor the division monitored or enforced compliance with attendance policies
- reasons for non-attendance and followup action were not documented
- controls to ensure attendance data is reliable were inadequate
- monthly attendance reporting was too summarized to be useful

We recommended that the division improve its guidance and procedures for schools to:

- consistently record and monitor student attendance
- benchmark acceptable attendance levels
- manage and follow up on non-attendance

Our current findings

The division has implemented our recommendation by improving the guidance and procedures to support schools to consistently record and actively monitor attendance. The division defined attendance benchmarks by asking each school to develop an engagement plan that must set out a target student attendance measure. For example, each of the 17 schools through their engagement plans set attendance targets for the 2024–2025 year ranging from 49.5 per cent to 81.5 per cent. Based on specific circumstances, some schools committed to lower attendance targets. Division management approved all targets. For schools with lower targets, it offered higher levels of support—for example, principal mentoring, central student services assistance, and hiring additional educational assistants. Their attendance activities are actively monitored to ensure schools have the capacity to meet or exceed targets. When setting short- and longer-term division-wide targets, division management evaluated the impacts of lower targets to make sure that, on an aggregate basis, it is on track to deliver on its short- and long-term attendance goals.

Division management improved attendance recording and enforcement procedures by:

- updating the attendance tracking process to monitor daily student attendance and document reasons for absenteeism. The central office oversees attendance, regularly reviews attendance data, identifies trends, and facilitates strategies for non-attendances.
- developing standard attendance policies and operating procedures for consistently enforcing student attendance at all schools. Followup school visits and regular month-end reports are reviewed by management for compliance. Schools have developed local “attendance action protocols” that are enforced by teachers and principals.
- requiring schools to record attendance twice daily and document reasons for each student absence. Teachers are required to use standardized attendance codes.
- implementing strategies at schools to follow up on non-attendance. These include monthly attendance improvement committee meetings, family wellness worker home visits, and attendance communication letters sent to parents.
- improving controls over the reliability and completeness of attendance data. These include:
 - staff training on the student information system, including recording and use of attendance codes
 - monthly attendance data reviews to identify and investigate recording errors
 - applying a new data security policy for user account access requests and termination steps
- implementing principals’ monthly reports review, involving collaboration between the school principals and the division.
- consolidating attendance data from schools by the division director of student engagement, attendance, and completion. The director compiles a board report to highlight attendance trends, month-to-month comparisons, and detailed breakdowns for analysis.

The division also shared its attendance improvement practices and successes with other divisions and the department. The approach for sharing practices included presentations at conferences, associate superintendent presentations to other divisions, and the exchange of engagement plan templates.

Management provided documentation to demonstrate that processes were followed and consistently applied across the division’s schools.

Recommendation: **Department of Education and Childcare— Oversight by the department IMPLEMENTED**

Context

The department oversees education policy and regulations at school jurisdictions, including at the division. In 2015, we found that the department's oversight of the division failed because it did not signal changes in preferred behaviour when the division reported limited action to improve attendance, and department resources were not coordinated with the division's efforts to improve attendance. As a result, we recommended that the department exercise oversight over the division by ensuring it develops and executes an operational plan to improve attendance.

Our current findings

The department implemented our recommendation by enhancing its oversight over the division's development of a workable student attendance operational plan and ensuring it is annually updated and executed.

The department organized its oversight activities using a plan for the division that covered five strategies:

- plan what needs to be done
- signal preferred behaviours and convey expectations
- check that processes and systems are working well
- evaluate results and provide feedback
- demonstrate vigilance in providing oversight of the division

For each strategy, the department clearly identified actions, deliverables, timelines, responsibilities, success indicators, and progress reporting. It also maintained regular check-ins with the division, including periodically monitoring the division's progress in implementing its operational plan.

The department's internal attendance subcommittee reviews and analyzes the division's attendance results and gives feedback to the division. Attendance monitoring is coordinated with the division's director of student engagement, attendance, and completion to ensure consistency and alignment.

The department and the division provided us with documentation to demonstrate the nature and extent of the department's intervention, support, and engagement. This included a review of minutes for a regular schedule of meetings. We observed that the department consistently provided oversight in the development of an adequate division attendance operational plan and in monitoring its results, including reporting through the *Annual Education Results Report*.

About our Assessment of Implementation Report

Management is responsible for implementing our recommendations. We examine implementation plans and perform procedures to determine whether management has implemented our recommendations when management asserts that they have been implemented. We repeat our recommendations if we do not find evidence they have been implemented. We may also issue new recommendations for matters that come to our attention during our assessment.

We conduct our assessments of implementation under the *Auditor General Act*. We apply Canadian Standard on Quality Management 1. Accordingly, we have maintained a comprehensive system of quality management, including documented policies and procedures regarding compliance with applicable professional standards and applicable ethical, legal, and regulatory requirements. We comply with the independence and other ethical requirements of the Chartered Professional Accountants of Alberta Rules of Professional Conduct, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity and due care, objectivity, professional competence, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.



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