

# Big Brother works

CLARE PEDDIE

SMART software designed to track truants at Golden Grove High School has lifted student attendance, achievement and behaviour, but the Education Department has no plans to roll it out across the state.

The school wanted a better way to keep track of more than 1000 students on flexible timetables that included work placements, TAFE courses and apprenticeships. It thought unexplained absences from individual lessons could form a pattern of avoidance that highlighted issues requiring further attention.

Adelaide company Code House was invited to develop a system that could interface with the timetable and the Student Timetable Absence Tracking System was born. STATS is now in use at four other schools: Adelaide, Salisbury, Woodville and the senior school at Paralowie R-12.

Golden Grove High principal Mal Kemp said student attendance this term was "the highest on record". He said the new system was a far better way to keep track of student absences than more traditional methods.

"We believe our attendance figures are more relevant than the previous ones we had, because we'd base our attendance on who was present in morning home group and that had no bearing on who was actually present in the lesson," he said.

"What matters is students are in class, in their subjects, learning. And we're able to measure that."

Last year, the rate of unauthorised absences from class fell to an "all-time low" of 1.6 per cent, "well below" the state level of 4.8 per cent.

Over time, the STATS package has been adapted to support behaviour management. Records are kept of confiscated items and visits to the time-out room, which enables senior staff to "pick up on kids who are suddenly flaring up". "There is usually a reason for that and you can always get to



**TRUANCY TRACKING:** Golden Grove High Year 8 to 10 teacher Robyn Humphries with student Kacy Ratta, scanning the attendance book.

that and try to help the student before they go any further," Mr Kemp said.

Year 9 student Kacy Ratta, 14, who has an exceptional record of attendance, spent one day last week taking the portable scanner to each classroom and handing it over to the teacher, who "checked" off each student in class. The role is shared around student volunteers in Years 8 to 10, so they know exactly how the system operates.

"It obviously works because you can't miss a class without people knowing, like you would have before," she said.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Education and Children's Services said secondary schools were obliged to use an electronic system of student leave passes, called the Incidental Absence Manager,

which kept track of students on school grounds. It did not cover attendance at individual lessons.

"The department currently has no plans to introduce the Student Timetable Absence Tracking System as schools already use the Incidental Absence Manager, which was introduced to schools with a secondary enrolment in 2005," she said.

Code House general manager Gavin Andrew said the swipe-in, swipe-out system was open to abuse. "All they do is record the fact that a student was there at school in the morning, and if they turned up late or left early," he said. "They're not recording any attendance during classes, so someone can walk in and swipe their card and then walk out."

## It's time to test the limits

LAUREN NOVAK

FUTURE testing of students will use more interactive technologies tailored to individuals, to get a truer result, says the Australian head of an international research project.

Professor Barry McGaw is heading the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills project, designed to develop new assessment methods and technologies.

Professor McGaw said outcomes of the three-year project would change the way student skills were assessed to be "clever and more efficient".

He said future examinations should test students to gauge "the limit" of their knowledge, unlike present methods.

"Because we have to design an exam for everyone we've got quite a lot of stuff that's not much use for each individual," he said.

"To work out what a student knows you've got to test at the limit of their knowledge.

"(In future) we could have simulated situations dealing with problems in, say, physics and chemistry that we couldn't replicate with paper and pencil.

"When the student starts the test they could be presented with a question of average difficulty. If they get it right, they are given a harder question. If they get it wrong, they are given an easier one.

"This uses much less time and gives much better information."

Professor McGaw is a former director for education for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and was a key figure in the development of the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures the reading, mathematical and scientific skills of 250,000 students in 32 countries.

He said new testing methods developed as part of the new Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills project could first be used in tests such as PISA or Australia's national literacy and numeracy testing.

"The way it will start is not with Year 12 exams; the high-stakes exams might be the last thing we would experiment with," he said.

"The first place you'll see the experimenting is in assessment where it's based on samples of kids where we want to know how the system is doing."

Professor McGaw, director of the University of Melbourne's Melbourne Education Research Institute, said Australia performed well in education internationally but must continue to improve.

"The competition's not standing still, they're getting better," he said, pointing to Hong Kong, which had achieved results by focusing on assessment, curriculum and teacher development.

Professor McGaw said the Australian Government had made these three areas a priority but this did not guarantee success.

"We're getting those ducks in a row but we need a well co-ordinated effort," he said.



**OUT OF THIS WORLD:** Belinda Rutherford and Liam Jenkins make alien masks at the Australian National SF Convention in Adelaide.

## Teach fact from sci-fi

EXPLORING science fiction can enrich studies of science fact, says Canadian writer Julie Czerneda. The former biologist has written textbooks and science-fiction novels, but says fiction is best to encourage readers to engage with science.

"People who don't like science like science fiction," she said. "Especially the kids - they're so open-minded."

Czerneda said fiction could show students another side of science. "It lets them know that science is done by people -

people who care about the work - it shows the emotional side of it, the teamwork side of it," Czerneda said.

"The literature does this in ways that teachers don't get across in science class."

Czerneda held a workshop at the Australian National SF Convention in Adelaide this month, offering fresh ideas and inspiration for teachers.

Children were encouraged to exercise their imaginations at the event by making alien masks.

Clare Peddie

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