

## Reducing Teacher Absenteeism: Solutions for Africa

### Introduction

Teacher absenteeism is a growing problem and one of the key challenges facing the pursuit of quality education in schools in Africa. A teacher in the classroom is an important but insufficient prerequisite for improving learning achievement. However, absenteeism significantly prejudices the learning outcomes of the children in the classroom, demoralizes school organizational culture and represents a significant waste of financial public and private resources. In African education systems that often operate on scarce resources with weak management systems, innovative models on how to effectively address teacher and learner absenteeism are yet to be fully realized. This brief is developed in anticipation of exploring possible models that focus on accounting for the attendance of teachers in class using technologies and other management tools. The brief assesses the scope of the challenge and highlights promising initiatives that deserve further exploration and research. In doing so it intends to position ADEA to undertake a pilot study in one or more countries to push the boundaries on what is contextually possible on a system wide scale and provide catalytic information for other countries to follow suit.

### Defining Absenteeism ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The concept of teacher absenteeism is complex. It needs to be determined by what is meant by its inverse concept - teacher attendance. Official teacher workloads vary across the continent. A World Bank study in 2010 found variations ranging from 12 to 32 hours per week in seven Anglophone countries, namely Eritrea, Gambia, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Zambia and Zanzibar. In other countries such as Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe this goes up to 40 hours per week. Teachers are required to arrive sharply at the start of the school day and remain until their scheduled work time is ended. Their contact time with pupils is scheduled in an official school timetable managed by the head teacher. Head teachers are similarly obliged to be in attendance for the school day, a concept which also differs among countries. They are required to monitor teacher attendance, grant the right to teachers to take official absence and censure and report teachers who take absence without permission. A teacher can be deemed to be absent if they fail to meet the set hours without authority.



### Authorized Absenteeism

Teachers can be granted the right to absent from the teaching their allocated pupils on a number of grounds. Some of these include:

- **Health** - This includes personal illness, hospitalization and can include caring for sick relatives. This usually requires supporting documentation from a health authority.
- **Leave** - This refers to time off from work to which employees are entitled. Teachers can apply for study leave, maternity leave, and annual leave among others.
- **Administration** - This includes situations where teachers perform official extra duties outside of their classroom assignments, such as marking national examinations, participation in community or professional committees, supporting national elections and census activities.
- **In-service training** - Teachers participate in training either on site or elsewhere away from the classroom.
- **Collecting salaries** - In some African countries, teachers are stationed in remote locations not serviced by financial institutions and they need to take time off from work in order to collect their salaries. How long this takes is often a function of road and transport networks. Sometimes and in some countries, the payment of salaries is delayed without prior notification. This obliges teachers who may have already travelled to payment centres to wait until their salaries are processed, further prejudicing teaching time.
- **Other** - These include authorized teacher strikes, sports days, staff funerals and official visits by dignitaries all of which also remove the teacher from teaching pupils in the classroom

*“Accountability systems and incentive structures, no matter how well designed, are only as effective as the capacity of the organization to respond. The purpose of an accountability system is to focus the resources and capacities of an organization towards a particular end.*

*(Elmore, 2004b, p. 117).*

## Unauthorized Absenteeism

Forms of unauthorized absenteeism include;

- **Truancy** - Absence without permission varies across countries depending on the monitoring systems in place and the accountability of the head teacher.
- **Tardiness** - Standards of tardiness may vary from country to country but generally if a teacher arrives more than 30 minutes late and/or leaves earlier than the scheduled time they are considered absent.
- **Moonlighting** - Many teachers particularly in low income situations often take second jobs in order to subsidise their expenses. The practice of schooling with double shifts lends itself to teachers taking a second job where they are only responsible for one shift.
- **Security** - Sometimes schools are not safe places and teachers are absent out of fear of conflict. Ethnic divisions can discourage teachers, particularly from a different background than from where they teach, from coming to school for fear of prejudice or violence.
- **Teacher Strikes** - poor working conditions and low remuneration and benefits lead teachers to take industrial action, which is often unauthorized and can have a severe impact on learning and coverage of the curriculum.
- **Abandonment** - Teachers leave their posts indefinitely for other posts outside of teaching without formal notification.
- **Kickbacks** - Anecdotal evidence that some principals and teachers arrange to split the teacher's salary and the teacher is allowed to come only a few days a week
- **Fraud** - Ghost teachers are teachers who exist only on paper but get paid a salary.

## Managing Teacher Attendance and Absenteeism

There is a scarcity of information on country reports and analyses of teacher absenteeism. This hinders an understanding of the magnitude of the problem and the patterns associated with teachers taking authorized and unauthorized leave. Very few studies on African education systems have correlated teacher absenteeism with its impact on learner achievement, school morale and the direct financial costs to government. Within countries absenteeism is larger in poorer, more isolated schools, contributing to unequal educational opportunities.

There are a number of factors which affect the rate of teacher absenteeism. Primarily these include poor living and working conditions of teachers, low remuneration and weak teacher management monitoring and accountability systems.

Weak management practice is often used to explain high rates of absenteeism. The responsibility for managing teachers is often spread across several ministries and commissions which among themselves have weak accountability links<sup>1</sup>. Teachers are often not included in decision making processes that affect their welfare and in countries where

the profession is highly politicized or unionized, very little can be done to truant teachers. A case in point would be South Africa where teacher unions are against the introduction of electronic clocking in systems and the dismissal of teachers who do not perform.<sup>2</sup>

*Rates of absenteeism differ among private and government schools and whether schools are rural and urban. World Bank studies in Latin America and Asia show higher rates of teacher absenteeism in rural areas than in urban and suburban districts.<sup>3</sup> A self-perpetuating cycle exists in rural areas which struggle to attract and retain teachers and face the additional challenge of high teacher absenteeism. The professional culture of a school, including the relationship between teachers and administrators, has also been found to affect teacher absenteeism. This is in contrast to findings from a 2006 DFID study showing lower rates of absenteeism in rural areas than urban areas in five African countries. A recent South African study noted that schools in the top two wealth quintiles tended to "over report" absenteeism while the schools in bottom two quintiles "under-reported, creating an illusion that the differences between the two groups were negligible.*

Study findings have shown that in some countries cases of unauthorized teacher absenteeism are lower than those for authorized absences indicating a form of institutionalized handicap in the education system. The studies have also noted that truancy often goes unpunished and unchecked by those in authority while authority figures, the head teachers are themselves frequently absent. A recent survey in Uganda found that 40 per cent of the teaching force arrive late and leave work earlier than officially scheduled.<sup>4</sup> Managing teacher absenteeism is complicated by regulations that allow teachers to be absent for a legitimate reason, such illness without a medical letter for two days in the case of South Africa, which then lends itself to abuse.

The ill health of teachers is a critical factor in explaining absenteeism, particularly when the prevalence of HIV and AIDS is high. According to the 2006 Global Monitoring Report, Kenya, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia experienced 600 to 700 teacher years of absenteeism for personal illness largely due to HIV and AIDS within 2005 alone.

The lack of available teacher housing in close proximity to their schools, particularly in rural areas, is often a factor exacerbating poor teacher attendance. Only 23 per cent of teachers in one sample study in Uganda lived within a radius of 5 km from their schools.<sup>5</sup> In many countries, working conditions are not always conducive for teaching and in Nigeria for example, many teachers do not even have a desk in their classrooms.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/motshekga-moots-biometric-system-teachers>

<sup>3</sup> <http://uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2139/8983/Raymond%20Hackett55.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>4</sup> TISSA, 2013, "Teacher issues in Uganda: A diagnosis for a shared vision on issues and the designing of a feasible, indigenous and effective teachers policy"

<sup>5</sup> Okrut H.E, 2012, Nature, Causes and Magnitude of teacher absenteeism in the rights, education and development (READ) project schools in Uganda, Build Africa

Low remuneration features frequently in the literature on factors causing absenteeism although the debate on this remains inconclusive. Some research indicates that higher salaries were not associated with better attendance. Perhaps this should not be surprising: salaries of teachers and head teachers are typically based on education and seniority, not on performance, and hence provide little incentive for attendance. In a bid to curb corruption, in the early years after its independence, the Government of Liberia introduced a centralized payroll system compelling teachers to travel to the county head office to collect their own pay cheques. This exercise can take a whole week to complete given the cost of travelling which forces some to walk and results in the loss of significant contact hours.

As many as 75 per cent of rural and 67 per cent of urban teachers in Tanzania admitted to secondary employment activities while in Zambia these figures were 44 per cent and 14 per cent respectively.<sup>6</sup> In some instances Ministries of Education give teachers financial incentives for better performance. In Kenya where teacher performance was based on test scores, teachers were found to be teaching for the test and not much else compromising real learning outcomes. Such findings suggest that the relationship between teacher salaries and teacher attendance is not direct proportional but is influenced by other factors.

Research indicates that teachers in Zambia have developed a 'work as you earn' attitude towards their jobs leading to secondary income activities and divided attention to their jobs<sup>7</sup>. Similarly in Ghana, teachers commit quite a bit of time towards farming activities and collecting pay in nearby towns thereby affecting their attendance<sup>8</sup>.

### Scope of the Challenge

Since there has been a dearth of reliable comparable information on teacher absenteeism in Africa, it is difficult to map the scope of the challenge, illuminate the possible causes of absence and offer appropriate policy solutions. Available research is often out of date and highly aggregated rates are reported which hide the wide variations found within countries. A provider absence survey conducted by the World Bank in 2008 found teacher absenteeism rates as

6 Bennell and Akyeampong, (2007: 54).  
7 Bennell and Musikanga, (2005)  
8 Bennell and Akyeampong, (2007)

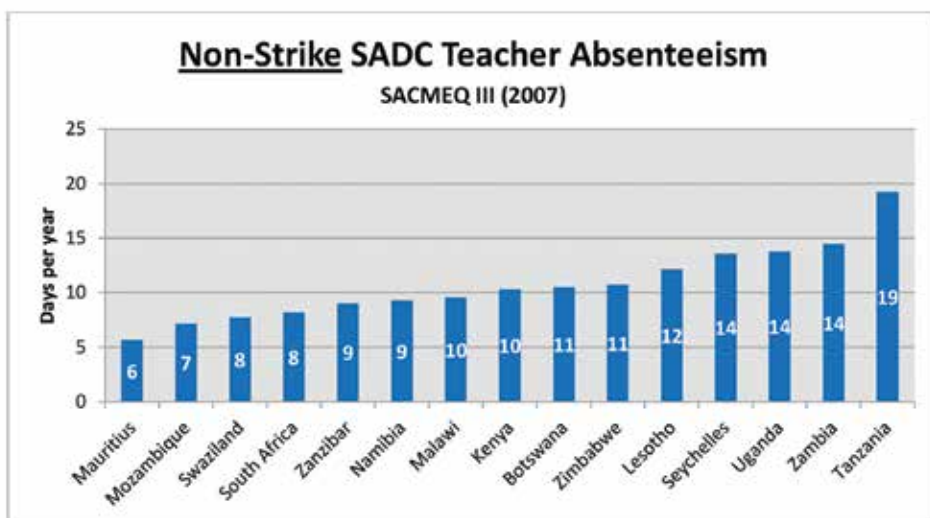
high as 30 per cent in Kenya. This was followed by Senegal at 27 per cent, Cameroon at 16 per cent, and Ghana at 8 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

Non-strike teacher absenteeism in Southern Africa ranged from 6 days a year in Mauritius to 19 in Tanzania. South Africa reported 8 days. When self-reported teacher absenteeism days including the strike days were included, this rose to 19 days a year pushing South Africa to the top of the table in SADC.<sup>10</sup> In 2010 teacher strikes again in South Africa led to the loss of an estimated 20 days per teacher. Industrial action when not properly managed clearly has a profound impact on contact time.<sup>11</sup> Poor health and transport problems were cited as some of the causes along with what the Minister of Education called 'pure absenteeism'. The total number of days lost to the South African education sector amounted to 7 448 000 in a single year.

Teacher absenteeism in Uganda in 2009/10 was thought to be as high as 21 per cent. Other sources indicate it is a high as 30 per cent, making it one of the highest in the world.<sup>12</sup> This national average is thought to cover up regional extremes.<sup>13</sup> Research over the same period found teacher absenteeism rates in some schools going up to 50 per cent with head teachers in many of these institutions counted as absent. In many cases the school heads were found not to leave any information as to their whereabouts.

In Sierra Leone teacher absenteeism varies from 10 to 40 per cent and this is exacerbated by the government's cap on teacher recruitment. Often classrooms are staffed by unpaid and unqualified educators or even go without teachers. Such untrained teachers lose contact hours during periods as they are often found at head office trying to regularize their employment status. Research findings from a study in Zambia found that a 5 per cent increase in teacher absentee rates reduced learning outcomes by between 4 and 8 per cent of average gains in a year. A recent South African study observing 58 schools concluded that teachers did not teach 60% of the lessons they were scheduled to teach<sup>14</sup>.

9 Rogers H & Koziol M. Provider (2009) *Absence Surveys in Education and Health: A Guidance Note*  
10 SACMEQ III  
11 DBE, 2011: 18  
12 World Bank, MoES quoted on CU@school at <http://twaweza.org/>  
13 Okrut H.E, 2012, *Nature, Causes and Magnitude of teacher absenteeism in the rights, education and development (READ) project schools in Uganda, Build Africa*  
14 Carnoy & Chisholm et al, (2012)



Source: Spaul (2014)



**Table I: Teacher absenteeism rates by reason and location, 2004**

Country	Location	Illness	Duty	Leave	Other Authorized	Non-authorized	Total
Ghana	Rural	4.5	0	4.5	3.6	0	12.6
	Urban	10.1	13.6	0	0	3.6	27.3
Sierra Leone	Rural	4.8	3.2	3.2	0	0	11.2
	Urban	2.5	5	1.7	2.5	0	11.7
Tanzania	Rural	8.5	16.9	1.7	3.4	1.7	32.3
	Urban	4.9	4.9	0	10.9	10.9	13.7
Zambia	Rural	1.6	0	0.8	0.9	2.3	7.9
	Urban	4.1	0.5	2.3	2.1	6.4	16.8
Malawi	Rural	na	na	na	na	na	17.2
	Urban	na	na	na	na	na	17.6

Note: Teacher absenteeism on the day of the survey

Source: P. Bennell and K. Akyeampong, (2007) *Teacher Motivation in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia*, DFID

In sum while teacher absenteeism in Sub-Saharan Africa has traditionally not been as big a problem relative to regions such as South Asia, the subject has begun to receive widespread attention due to the growing proportions of errant teachers and the growing focus on learner achievement. The limited information available seems to suggest that poor teacher working conditions and education management systems are at the root of the problem. As has already been noted, a large chunk of Government spending in the education sector in Africa goes towards salaries. In Mozambique in 2005 the financial cost of absenteeism was estimated at USD 3.3 million with an additional USD 0.3 million estimated for increased teacher training costs for substitute teachers.

### Tracking Teacher Attendance via Mobile Phones

*Compared to the current method of data collection process that relies on a hybrid of paper-form and computer-based mobile phones have shown great promise for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of data collection in a resource-constraint environment. Mobile phones improve adherence to format of the questionnaire, as the sender follows pre-defined set of procedures to the receiver and can determine what question to be answered. Mobile devices data collection can be done more quickly, and less possibility of errors and ultimately reduce the number of costly and time consuming factors such as travel, time in the field, training and the cut down data processing cycle time. The use of Mobile Phone was found to be motivation to head teachers and education officers as it created a serious culture of tracking attendance for both student and teachers which continued to be challenged.*

*The used of Mobile Phone as a Data Collection tool  
- a report by Planning Unit, Ministry of Education, The Gambia (2014)*

In Uganda where absenteeism rates range from 20% - 30% varying per districts, teacher absenteeism costs the Ugandan government US\$ 30 million every year for paid services that are not delivered. Investing in better teacher management systems and working conditions under such circumstances is likely to require cost effective and efficient models. Only in recent years have promising initiatives measuring teacher absence have emerged that go beyond relying solely on questionable administrative records of attendance.

### Promising Initiatives

There are a few African countries that undertaken innovative strategies to deal with teacher absenteeism beyond the physical registers of teacher attendance. These generally include the use of electronic registers, bio-swipe cards and mobile phone technology. These ICT based strategies, however, are most promising when linked to improved accountability systems involving head teachers, administrators and the school community. The Ministry of Education in the Gambia in partnership with the World Bank and a locally found technology firm have implemented a mobile phone platform for the collection and dissemination of basic data on teacher absenteeism and tardiness. The project has allowed the disbursement of simple mobile phones across the country districts to head teachers. An agreement has also been reached with a mobile services provider which has allowed the creation of a Closed User Group at a cost of USD 2 per user per month. Head teachers are using this platform to send data on key attendance indicators on a daily basis to a computer server which reduces the challenge of tracking and consolidation of data and makes the information available in real time.



A similar programme is running in 99 primary and six secondary schools in Uganda's sub counties. These schools have teamed up with Nokia and Plan International to introduce a simple text messaging system that enables pupils to monitor and report teachers' absence. Should a teacher fail to attend class, students can anonymously send free texts to Plan which subsequently forwards these to the district education officer and district inspector of schools. These two representatives follow up on the missing teacher.

Similarly, the CU@SCHOOL pilot project in Uganda uses mobile phones to monitor teacher and pupil attendance and absenteeism in 100 primary schools on a weekly basis. The pilot uses open source software called openXdata: any data, anywhere, anytime on any device. OpenXdata is user friendly and allows for error-free capture of large datasets and digital photos on simple phones. Rather than SMS technology, openXdata uses forms that are sent on GPRS, keeping the cost as low as 1 US dollar for 2,000 messages.

In Rwanda, at least two mobile tracking projects have received the support of Ministry of Education. The Kiguzo Attendance Tracking System uses tablets to allow teachers to report a student missing. The tablet then automatically sends a mobile message to community education workers who then investigate the child's whereabouts. The Ndi Hano! project (loosely translated as 'I am here'), has been testing mobile attendance reporting in select primary schools in Kigali since 2013 and can hopefully be customized to allow students and head teachers to report on teacher absenteeism.

The Ministry of General Education and Instruction EMIS department in the Republic of South Sudan in 2011 adopted the use of VSAT satellite Internet capabilities in national and State level offices. Smartphones which access regional cell networks to transfer data from county and state sites collect photographic, geo-positioning and verification data for more than 2,000 schools and make the information available in Google Earth format via the Internet. A nonprofit human development organization, FHI 360 provides the Ministry with the necessary support to collect a range of indicators which include the number of students and teachers present, and the types of facilities and textbooks available. This tool or 'Kmobile' system has allowed the Ministry to reduce the data collection and reporting time by at least 30 percent.

Several South American and Asian countries have witnessed the benefits of community involvement. In Chile, El Salvador and Honduras, school based management reforms that included school based management reforms led to teachers being less frequently absent. Similar gains were witnessed in Ghana where there has been a greater emphasis on parents collaborating with teachers in the form of Parent Teacher Associations. Somalia has made use of what are known as Community Education Committee (CECs) which comprise of teachers and parents. These CEC's receive training on school management and community mobilization and over 14, 680 Community Education Committee (CEC) members have been trained in school management and community mobilization. Such arrangements also make teachers accountable to the community and less likely to engage in absenteeism.

Managing leave requires greater capacity building within



Ministries of Education. The challenge lies in balancing leave applications and supplying an adequate number of substitute teachers when and as the need arises. According to Voluntary Services Organization (VSO), often the effective management of resources rather than the application of new resources "can do much to achieve the conditions whereby teaching quality can improve".<sup>15</sup> The organization also notes that capacity should be built among both educators and administrators.

Management also extends to paying teachers on time and providing non-financial incentives such as health and housing allowances. Examples from the Western Cape in South Africa indicate that properly run performance management systems and performance evaluations can have a positive effect on reducing teacher absenteeism and can be used in conjunction with performance based pay. Western Cape gave USD 2,000 to the highest performing school in each wealth quintile in each of its eight school districts. The benefits are however contingent on how well the users understand the system and how well it is customized to the teaching profession<sup>16</sup>

Liberia and Kenya stand out for having pushed through reforms in the banking sector to allow teachers greater flexibility when collecting their pay. In Kenya, the popularity of mobile banking has mitigated the impact of living in remote areas for many teachers who can now collect salaries through a mobile banking agent in their community. Mobile applications as a tool for teacher management have also been discussed. At a 2010 World Bank workshop on improving teacher management participants suggested using phone applications, to allow head teachers to stop the pay of non-performing or absent teachers. There have however been concerns about how such a system can be abused by head teachers.

The Western Cape Education Department in South Africa has implemented Human Capital Leave Management System (HCLMS) at most of its schools. This is an online, electronic system that captures educator attendance. All schools on the system must file their report before 10 am every day. Educators and schools have to confirm these 'digital' records as soon as possible by routing documentary evidence to the head office. These documents go via the district if needed. The system allows educators to check on the leave they have taken as well as the number of days that they can still take via the Internet or their cellular phones. Full online leave application will come with a second phase of roll-out. A few logistical conditions

<sup>15</sup> Mpokosa, C & Ndaruhutse, S, *Managing Teachers The centrality of teacher management to quality education Lessons from developing countries* [http://www.vsointernational.org/Images/Managing\\_Teachers\\_tcm76-20998.pdf](http://www.vsointernational.org/Images/Managing_Teachers_tcm76-20998.pdf)  
<sup>16</sup> Reid, (2010).



Photo: Kate Holt/AusAID

have delayed implementation of the HC-LMS in Western Cape in a minority of schools. These conditions mainly pertain to unavailable or inconsistent Internet connectivity, unavailable or intermittent electricity supply, and the availability of safe and secure premises at schools, such as burglar-proof, lockable administrative offices or computer rooms. Impediments to roll-out implementation at some schools also included unsuccessful recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled administrators, a lack of training and training opportunities for them, and the inability to provide and maintain the appropriate hardware and software required.<sup>17</sup>

A key factor in introducing an electronic based absenteeism system is obtaining buy in from the teacher unions. The Minister's proposal to introduce electronic tagging for teacher attendance in South Africa was rejected by the teacher unions on the grounds that it diminished the professionalism of teachers.

It is difficult to get a fix on size of teacher absenteeism, particularly as so much of it is under-reported. There is also recognition that many teachers work hours over and beyond their formal duties to keep abreast of the curriculum and support challenged learners. Introducing a system that micro-manages their attendance may have tendency to diminish the professional trust accorded them. Teachers may then "work to rule" and not put in those necessary extra hours to support struggling learners. There needs to be a balance between giving teachers the space to demonstrate passion and commitment to their learners and micro-managing their attendance.

<sup>17</sup> Reddy et al, 2010, An investigation into educator leave in the South African ordinary public schooling system <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/593/AnInvestigationintoEducatorLeavedec2010.pdf>

## Recommendations

There is no single solution to the challenge of addressing teacher absenteeism. It requires a multi-prong approach. Here are some recommended measures:

- Establish effective school management practices by school heads and administrators supported by incentives for school communities and even learners to hold schools accountable for absent teachers and learners. Teacher attendance logbooks are completed twice a day in the head teacher's office and weekly reports are sent to district administrators. A system of time keepers/class monitors amongst the learners within the school who record the time a teacher starts and ends a lesson can be very effective measure to track the teacher contact time as a function of teaching load in the case of secondary schools.
- Support health awareness programs which impact favourably on teacher absenteeism
- Minimize authorized teacher absences caused by administrative duties and allocate to the bursar, deputy or head or place these activities during school holidays or after hours. Similarly, in-service training should occur outside of contact teaching hours. Where this is not possible, allocate substitute teachers as required.
- Switch to electronic or mobile banking platforms to allow teachers in remote locations to access their salaries without having to travel.
- Advocate positive teacher engagement during preliminary stages of reforms as it serves to reduce teacher absenteeism.
- Improve teacher living and working conditions as a priority.
- Introduce teacher allowances for those located in remote, rural or stressful areas as an incentive to retain teachers in schools.
- Track teacher absenteeism in terms of tardiness, and authorized/non authorized absence on a daily basis by school and undertake analyses of patterns of absenteeism by individual teachers and schools.
- Consider introducing an ICT based application to report teacher absenteeism on a daily basis either through mobile technologies, electronic registers or school e-administration systems.

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