

will affect the smooth functioning of the school.

- Schools must manage the high levels of discretionary leave, especially on Mondays and Fridays. Schools should have systems to record leave and produce outputs which will show patterns of leave mis-use, which can be managed by the principal.
- Schools must strategically monitor leave taking and leave patterns, and if these are abused, implement measures to ensure that leave taking is reduced.
- Incentivize the reduction of discretionary leave, because this is more disruptive to the running of the school and teaching and learning processes.

## 2. Reduce the educator leave rates in schools where it is higher than 10%:

With the support of district officials, target the initial interventions in the 30% of schools whose leave rates are higher than 10%.

## 3. Improve working conditions to encourage educators and learners to attend school:

Ensure that schools are pleasant, safe and comfortable places that will motivate both educators and learners to attend school more regularly.

## 4. Improve the systems to record leave onto PERSAL systems:

Reduce the number of steps between the time that the leave form is completed by the educator to the time it is captured onto the electronic system. This can be effected with an electronic leave administration

system implemented at school level.

## 5. Improve leave administrative systems and support in schools:

All schools need to have an administrative clerk, who has computer skills and whose responsibilities should include ensuring completion of leave forms, keeping school records and monitoring leave trends. The roll-out of systems like the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) could facilitate this recording. The role of the principal is to monitor the trends of individuals and to manage any excessive leave taking.

## 6. Record leave for official business on a central database:

Given the concerns about the high proportion of educators away from school on official business, we recommend that these categories are also included on the PERSAL recorded leave form. This will allow for monitoring and managing the loss of learning time.

## 7. Monitor the national leave rates:

We estimated the South African leave rates from a number of sources using different methodologies, and where the definitions and assumptions underlying the calculations were not always the same. South Africa needs to develop an instrument to calculate leave rate and provide a clear definition of the variables used in the formula. In the meantime, the integrity of the administrative data (PERSAL) must be improved to be trustworthy.



# RESEARCH BRIEF ON EDUCATOR LEAVE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN ORDINARY PUBLIC SCHOOLING SYSTEM

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

### INTRODUCTION

This research brief draws on the study *An Investigation into Educator Leave in the South African Ordinary Public Schooling System* by Vijay Reddy, Cas Prinsloo, Tshilidzi Netshitangani, Relebohile Moletsane, Andrea Juan and Dean Janse van Rensburg.

There is a commitment in South Africa to improve the quality of education. One way to achieve this is to ensure that "teachers and children are in school and class."

This research was commissioned by the Department of Education to investigate the (i) extent, (ii) patterns, (iii) reasons, (iv) recording and (v) administration and management of educator<sup>1</sup> leave<sup>2</sup> in South African ordinary public schools. To address these questions we reviewed the policy and literature related to educator leave; analysed PERSAL and the 2008 Department of Education commissioned 4% audit of ordinary schools data and visited 50 schools and supervising offices around the country to collect data.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ABOUT EDUCATOR LEAVE

- Studies on educator leave and absence can be placed into two categories: studies from high income countries and studies from low income countries. South Africa is a country of high income inequality - thus parts of the education system could be comparable to high income countries and parts comparable to low income countries.

- In high income countries, with good administrative systems the extent of teacher absence can be easily calculated. The teacher absence rates were calculated at between 3% and 6%<sup>3</sup>: in the USA the absence rate is around 5%; in Canada 6%; in Israel 5.8%; and in Ireland around 5.5%. In England sickness absence is 2.6%; and in Australia discretionary leave<sup>4</sup> is 3.1%. There are systems of substitute teachers to compensate for teacher absence and in the lower grades, families would generally compensate for lost time.

- In low income countries, where the administrative data is incomplete and not trustworthy, teacher observation surveys (World Bank National Absence Surveys - WBNAS) with unannounced visits to schools were undertaken to determine the extent of teacher absence. Absence rates in a number of countries averaged 19% with a range from 11% to 28%: Peru having an 11% absence rate; Ecuador 14%; Zambia 17%; India 25%; Uganda 27%; and Kenya 28%. While the national rates are high, there is variation depending on geographic location and the socio-economic conditions of schools. In low income countries, in general, there are no provisions for substitute teachers and it is unlikely that the home will be able to compensate for loss of learning time in the school. Thus the negative impact of educator leave on achievement is greater.

- South Africa has not undertaken dedicated studies to measure the extent of educator leave, and the

<sup>1</sup> The term educator is used in South Africa to refer to both teachers and management. In the international literature there is reference to teachers.  
<sup>2</sup> The international literature refers to the times when a teacher is not at school, either for leave taken in accordance with the leave measures stipulated in the conditions of service, or for absence resulting from undertaking professional duties away from school. For the South African study we will refer to educator leave and will include: (i) times taken according to leave measures; (ii) when educators are on duty but away from school at professional development workshops; (iii) and participation in school activities like sports, excursions and festivals.  
<sup>3</sup> A cautionary note when comparing leave rates across countries, studies or contexts is that one must also interrogate the formula used to calculate the leave rate.  
<sup>4</sup> This is leave of one or two days and does not require the presentation of a medical certificate.

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administrative data from South African schools is incomplete. We estimated the extent of educator leave by using proxy measures from other studies.

- The main reason cited in the literature for educators taking leave is due to illness. In low income countries, an additional reason for teachers being away from school is to undertake official duties such as attending professional development workshops or undertaking school activities like excursions and school sports.
- In high and low income countries, the pattern of leave taking is that teachers are absent more frequently on Mondays and Fridays and a high proportion of absences are due to illness which occurs in blocks of time short enough that no medical certification is required.
- In high income countries where the living and school conditions are generally good, individual characteristics such as gender and age are factors influencing the extent of teacher absence, and in these countries incentives may be provided to encourage individuals to attend more regularly. In low income countries the school and socio-environmental conditions influence the extent of teacher absence, and strategies to reduce leave taking are dependent on improved school conditions like infrastructure, instilling a leadership ethos and a school climate of non-tolerance of educator absence, and the long-term goal is improved conditions in the community, so that the educational level and economic status of parents are increased.

**POLICY INFORMING EDUCATOR LEAVE TAKING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

- All employees are entitled to take leave. The general leave measures are set out in the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997* and the *Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995*. For institution based educators, these measures appear in the *Personnel Administrative Measures* (Government Gazette Vol. 404 No 19767). The leave measures relate to health, family and special leave categories.
- There are times when an educator cannot perform her duties, and Chapter B of the PAM makes provision for the appointment of a substitute educator. The state pays for the substitute educator.

- Educators must account for 1 800 working hours per year. These are made up of 1 400 hours performing core duties during a formal school day and 400 hours spent on work done outside the formal school day, for example planning, preparation, evaluation, extra- and co-curricular activities, professional duties and professional development. Eighty (80) of the 400 hours may be used for ongoing professional development, allowing for professional development activities to take place outside the formal school day and during school holidays.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Analysis of the 2008 Khulisa Consortium audit of ordinary schools datasets and proxy calculations from other studies estimate that between 10% and 12% of educators are not at school on any day. Therefore our conservative, optimistic estimate is that on average between 20 and 24 days a year of regular instructional time are being lost by each educator. The conservatively estimated leave rate of 10% to 12% in South Africa is higher than the rate in high income countries, but lower than the rate in many low income countries, calculated in the WBNAS.
- There are variations in the extent of educator leave rates between provinces. In addition there is a link between individual school leave rates and poverty and disadvantage levels of the community and schools. Leave rates are highest where the socio-environmental condition, like poverty, is most negative.
- In this conservative, optimistic estimate, half the schools have a leave rate of less than 5%; 20% have a leave rate of between 5% and 10%; 18% have a leave rate between 10% and 20%; and 12% have a leave rate of over 20%. The greatest concern is about the almost one third of schools with leave rates greater than 10%.
- Educators are away from schools when they take leave according to the categories of leave measures set out in the policy and when they are undertaking official business. Analysis from our school visits estimated that around 20% to 25% of the time when educators are away from school they are on official duties, which mainly comprises curriculum workshops and related meetings. We then estimate that leave on official business is 2% and PERSAL recorded

leave is 8%. The extent of educator leave on official duties is higher for principals who have to attend a number of meetings called by officials from the Department of Education.

- The time away from school on official business, while essential, could have a negative impact on teaching and learning activities. This negative impact is higher in smaller and more under-resourced schools, thereby further disadvantaging the learners who most need quality schooling to escape the poverty trap.
- Analysis of PERSAL data calculates the national recorded leave rate at between 3% and 4%, which is less than the estimated leave rate. The under-recording on the PERSAL system may be due to educators not completing leave forms at school or leave forms are completed but not captured onto the electronic system. Comparing school leave records and PERSAL records shows that around 25% of submitted leave records were not recorded on PERSAL. In addition, mis-capturing onto the PERSAL system leads to incorrect balances for individuals.
- Just over three quarters of all leave instances recorded on the PERSAL system are of one or two days in duration, that is, discretionary leave not requiring a medical certificate. Mondays and Fridays are the most popular discretionary leave days. For such discretionary leave, sick leave is the most common reason for leave taking. But sick leave is also used as a catch all category for leave taking for private matters or family responsibility not catered for in the policy.
- In general we found that the administration of leave at school level was good. Most schools have copies of leave policies, educators are aware of these policies and there are systems within schools for the recording of leave and movement of educators. Schools with a trained and committed administrator expedited the processing and recording of leave.
- The school principal is responsible for managing discretionary leave and potential mis-uses of leave taking on Mondays and Fridays. While schools have been compliant in adhering to the administrative requirements regarding leave taking, they have not engaged with the strategic management of leave taking in order to reduce the extent of leave.

- Outside schools, within the provincial, regional, district, circuit and service centre offices, there were variations in leave management support to schools. When the route of the PERSAL form from school to data capturing had many intermediate steps, then the extent of leave under-recording or mis-recording is increased.
- Schools are aware of the Educator Substitute Policy and apply it well. Educators indicated that the implementation of the substitute policy works well for maternity leave, but for illness where one has to go through the services rendered by a Health Risk Manager, that the process is slow and inefficient. Rural schools in particular have difficulty in finding appropriate substitute specialists in mathematics and science in the secondary phase.
- We found the administrative systems in schools compliant and the general management of the school reasonable. Governance, management and administration systems seem to be in place. The next challenge for schools is to ensure teachers have the appropriate pedagogical content knowledge and effect high quality classroom interactions to achieve the desired learning outcomes. One part which contribute to this would be reducing the extent of time that educators are away from schools and classrooms.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO REDUCE LEAVE TAKING**

- 1. Time away from regular school and classroom activities can be reduced:**
  - Reduce the number of days that educators are away from school on professional development and other training workshops. This could be done by ensuring that the provincial directorates who request educators to attend meetings co-ordinate their requests and that activities are planned outside the formal school day. In addition, all schools need to be aware of the fact that 80 hours of professional development could occur outside the formal school hours.
  - Cap the number of days that principals are away from school on official business. The principal is key to the leadership, culture and ethos of a school, and if the principal is away for a high number of days, it