

Educator leave in the South African public schooling system

Introduction

Low educational achievements limit access to the labour market and reduce the chances of school leavers to break out of the cycle of poverty. A key concern of schools, society and the government is to find ways to manage and reduce leave taking by educators so that the loss of teaching and learning time for students is reduced.

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 (No. 75 of 1997) and the Labour Relations Act (No. 66 of 1995). For institution-based educators, these measures appear in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (*Government Gazette* Vol. 404 No. 19767). The leave measures relate to health, family and special leave categories. There are times when educators cannot perform their duties, and Chapter B of the PAM makes provision for the appointment of a substitute educator paid for by the state.

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 of the 400 hours may be used for ongoing professional development, which may take place outside the formal school day and during school holidays.

Research findings

Our analysis of the Khulisa Consortium audit of ordinary schools' data sets (DoE 2009) and proxy calculations from other studies indicate that between 10% and 12% of educators are not at school on any one 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 World Bank National Absence Surveys (WBNAS) (Chaudhury et al. 2006).

However, there are variations in the extent of educator leave rates between provinces. Thus 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 nationally with leave rates greater than 10%.

Leave rates are highest where socio-environmental conditions, including poverty, limited school infrastructure, poor working conditions, and the absence of a healthy school ethos, climate and leadership, are most negative. In addition, there is a link between the leave rates of individual schools and the poverty and level of disadvantage of the surrounding communities.

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. Our analysis from HSRC school visits indicated that around 20% to 25% of the time when educators are away from school they are on official duties, which mainly comprise curriculum workshops and related meetings. We then estimated that leave on official business is 2% and Personnel Salary Management System (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.

HSRC analysis of PERSAL data calculates the national recorded leave rate at between 3% and 4%, which is less than the leave rate of 10% to 12% estimated on the basis of the Khulisa Consortium audit of data sets. The under-recording

on the PERSAL system may be due to educators not completing leave forms at school or leave forms being completed but not captured onto the electronic system. Comparing school leave records and PERSAL records shows that approximately 25% of submitted leave records were not recorded on PERSAL. In addition, inaccurate capturing of leave records onto the PERSAL system leads to incorrect leave balances for individuals.

Just over three-quarters of all leave instances recorded on the PERSAL system are of one or two days in duration and fall into the category of discretionary leave not requiring a medical certificate. Mondays and Fridays are the most popular discretionary leave days recorded as sick leave and ill health is the most common reason given. However, sick leave is also used to cover 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 is in place. 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 expedite the processing and recording of leave.

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. The school principal is responsible for managing discretionary leave and potential abuse of leave taking on Mondays and Fridays.

Outside schools, within the provincial, regional, district, circuit and service centre offices, we found that 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 for which such regional, district, service centre and other offices were responsible, then the extent of under-recording or inaccurate recording of leave was 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 leave due to illness where one has to go through the services rendered by a health risk manager, 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.

In summary, we found administrative systems in schools to be compliant and the general management of schools to be reasonable. The next challenge for schools is to ensure that teachers have the appropriate pedagogical content knowledge and are able to include high-quality classroom interactions in order to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Reducing the extent of time that educators are away from schools and classrooms would contribute to improved teaching practice.

Impact of educator leave on learners

An inevitable consequence of teacher absence is a loss of teaching and learning time. In addition, when teachers are away from school, learner absence also increases (Kremer et al. 2005), although it is not possible to say which one causes the other. Since teacher absence causes a disruption to the teaching and learning processes, one would expect that there would be a link between teacher absence and student learning achievements. However, while schools with high levels of student underachievement generally report high rates of teacher absence, this does not necessarily suggest a causal relationship between

the two. Schools with high levels of underachievement are generally located in areas of low income where other factors may come into play. Pitkoff (1993) reports the highest predictor of teacher absenteeism rates is in schools where students' reading is below the expected level for their age and the second highest predictor is where students are eligible for a free lunch. This suggests that poverty and poor environmental conditions are predictors for both learner achievement and teacher absence. Teacher absence has a higher negative impact in low-income countries where there are no substitute teachers and the home is unable to substitute for loss of teaching inputs.

South Africa has undertaken a number of nationally representative achievement studies, such as Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and nationally systemic studies, for example, Annual National Assessments. Learners in general obtain poor achievement scores in the key areas of mathematics, languages and sciences which seem to be related to a range of school and classroom dynamics. These poor achievement scores are exacerbated by socio-environmental conditions and poverty. It is therefore difficult to establish a causal link between teacher absence and achievement.

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.

Generally, all school-based respondents (principals, educators and parents) agreed that educator absence from the schoolroom impacts negatively on learning. In addition to the impact

on learning and learning results, the respondents also indicated that there is a negative impact on learner safety and on educators who must take on additional workloads when their colleagues are away.

Recommendations

1. Reduce time away from regular school and classroom activities.

- Reduce the number of days that educators are away from school on professional development and other training workshops. Provincial directorates should co-ordinate their requests to educators to attend meetings, and activities should be planned outside the formal school day. In addition, all schools should be aware that 80 hours of professional development can take place outside formal school hours.
- Cap the number of days that principals are away from school on official business. Principals are essential to the leadership, culture and ethos of their schools and their extended absence will affect the smooth functioning of the schools.
- Institute systems in schools to record leave and to reveal patterns of leave abuse.
- Ensure that school principals monitor leave taking and leave patterns, and if these are abused, implement strategic measures to reduce leave taking. Principals should control high levels of discretionary leave, especially when taken on Mondays and Fridays.
- Incentivise 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 to take place 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 process of recording leave onto the PERSAL system.

Reduce the number of steps between the completion of the leave form by the educator and the capturing of the data onto the electronic system. This can be achieved by implementing an electronic leave administration system 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.

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

Given the concerns about the high proportion of educators absent from school on official business, we recommend that every absence is also recorded on the PERSAL 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 using audit data sets, PERSAL

data, international literature and own observations, 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 to 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.

References

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STUDY AUTHORS

Dr Cas Prinsloo Chief Research Specialist, Education and Skills Development Research Programme, Human Sciences Research Council.

Dr Vijay Reddy Executive Director, Education and Skills Development Research Programme, Human Sciences Research Council.

Enquiries to: Dr Cas Prinsloo, tel: +27 (0)12 302 2307; email: chprinsloo@hsrc.ac.za