

Taking leave cuts deep into teaching time, study reveals

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A STUDY of leave patterns among lecturers and teachers has found that students and pupils are affected negatively by the high absenteeism rates.

Commissioned by the Department of Education, the study investigated how much leave was taken in government schools, the patterns, and the reasons given for taking it.

Vijay Reddy, executive director of education and skills development, said the study found that, on any day, between 10 percent and 12 percent of teachers were not at school.

This implied that out of an average of 200 school days a year, between 20 and 24 days of teaching time were lost.

The study, carried out by the Human Sciences Research Council, used information from the Personnel and Salary Administration System as well as from visits to 50 schools and supervising offices around the country.

The study found good processes were in place for the administration of leave and that most schools had copies of leave policies, but poor administration prevented the system from being managed correctly.

However, Ezra Ramasehla, president of teachers' union Naptosa, expressed extreme concern about the finding that, at a conservative estimate, between 10 percent and 12 percent of teachers were away on any day.

"This translates into 40 000 teachers, on average, being out of class on any given day," he said.

Although the union recognised the rights of teachers to take leave, any abuse of the system was to be condemned in the strongest possible terms, Ramasehla said.

"The right of the child to quality education is paramount," said Ramasehla.

Reddy said that the most popular days for leave were Mondays and Fridays and that the majority of cases of instances were one or two days of discretionary leave, which meant a medical certificate did not have to be presented.

The main reasons for taking leave were illness, urgent private matters and family responsibility.

The study also found that in many cases, teachers were absent because of professional development and training workshops. This in particular reflected negatively on schools in rural areas as in most cases travelling time was double because of the schools' location.

Leave rates vary among the provinces and are highest where the level of socio-environmental factors like poverty is highest.

Reddy suggested that the number of days that principals were away from school on official business be capped.

She also recommended that the number of days that teachers were away for workshops could be reduced by ensuring that provincial directorates who asked them to attend meetings co-ordinated their requests and arranged activities for times that were not on school days.

Other solutions included the monitoring of leave and creating better working conditions to ensure schools were pleasant and safe so teachers and pupils were motivated to attend more regularly.

Ramasehla said the union supported the study's recommendations and was particularly pleased with the call to cap the number of days for which a principal could be called away to departmental meetings.

