

Absent teachers a big worry – study

40 000 educators not in class on any given day; schools in poor rural areas worst hit

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STUDENTS and pupils are negatively affected by the high absenteeism rates, a study on leave patterns of lecturers and teachers has revealed.

The research, commissioned by the Department of Education and presented by Dr Vijay Reddy, executive director of education and skills development, investigated the extent and reasons for leave in the South African public schools.

Reddy said the study revealed that on any day between 10 and 12 percent of educators are not at school.

This implied that out of an average of 200 school days a year, 20 to 24 days of educating time was lost.

The study by the Human Sciences Research Council, was based on research and data captured from Persal (Personnel and Salary Administration System) and visits to 50 schools and supervising offices around the country.

The study revealed that good administration of leave processes was in place. Also, that most schools had copies of leave policies, but poor administration meant the system was not being managed correctly.

However, Ezra Ramasehla, president of teacher union Naptosa, expressed extreme concern over the finding of a conservative leave estimate of 10 to 12 percent.

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

The rights of teachers in terms of leave and other conditions of service were recognised, he said, but any possible abuse in the system should be condemned in the strongest possible terms. "The right of the child to quality education is paramount," said Ramasehla.



Dr Temba Masilela, deputy chief executive of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), welcomed guests to a briefing on a study on educator leave patterns, presented by Dr Vijay Reddy, right, Executive Director of Education and Skills Development.

PICTURE: PHILL MAGAKOE

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

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

The study also revealed that in many cases, educators were absent due to professional development and training workshops.

This in particular negatively affected schools in rural areas as travel time in most cases doubled

due to the school's location.

There were variations in leave rates between the provinces.

Leave rates were highest where socio-environmental conditions – such as poverty – were the highest.

Reddy suggested that the number of days that principals were away from schools on official business had to be capped as the principal was key to the leadership, culture and ethos of a school.

She also recommended the number of days that educators were away on workshops be reduced by ensuring that provincial direc-

torates who convened educator meetings co-ordinate their requests and planned activities for days outside formal school days.

Other solutions included the monitoring of leave by schools and creating better working conditions by ensuring that the schools are pleasant and safe which will motivate teachers and pupils to attend school more regularly.

Ramasehla said Naptosa supported all the recommendations of the study.

The union was particularly pleased with the call for a cap on the

number of days a school principal can be called away from school to attend departmental meetings.

The call for a reduction in the number of days of absence for professional development was also supported by the union.

"To improve the quality of education we must decrease time away from schools and classrooms," he said.

"Educators have a right to fair labour practices and conditions of service, just as pupils have a right to education where no instruction time should be lost," Reddy said.

