

Teacher Absenteeism

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Citizen reaction to teacher absenteeism has been increasing. Almost every stakeholder in the education sector is attacking teachers on this issue. Few have paused to consider the nature and dynamics of teacher absenteeism.

As I see it, teachers have been caught up, unwittingly, in a cultural malpractice, without fully understanding its ramifications. Really, what does one do if conditions of work mandate that twenty-eight days—fourteen sick and fourteen occasional—are available with pay to you each year? Legally, what is wrong with enjoying this privilege?

No one has taken the opportunity to painstakingly explain to teachers the implications of this leave agreement for which their unions have fought so hard. Neither the Ministry of Education nor the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA) has seriously addressed this problem. While TTUTA, on several occasions, has raised the matter within the context of the provision of substitute teachers, the ethical and curricular dimensions of teacher absenteeism were never coherently treated. Research findings on substitute teachers in the USA reveal that student learning is often not as high with substitute teachers as they tend to be with regular teachers.

Teacher absenteeism is an issue that goes deeper than many stakeholders may imagine. It is an issue that affects developing as well as developed countries, their economies, their schools, and their students. Researchers claim that it strongly affects school effectiveness; that it results in the loss of school days, which in turn has been found to diminish student academic achievement; that it helps to damage a school's reputation; and that it creates and sustains a ripple effect on student absenteeism.

World Bank studies in Latin America and Asia confirm that teacher absenteeism tends to be higher in rural areas than in urban and suburban districts. It has also been found that districts which have the most trouble attracting and retaining teachers are also the ones where issues around teacher absenteeism are most pressing. According to a joint study by researchers at the World Bank and Harvard University, absenteeism is extremely common among teachers in developing countries. It would be interesting to replicate similar research projects in Trinidad and Tobago. My gut reaction suggests that findings will not be significantly different.

Researchers in India have found that the problem among teachers there has remained hydra-headed because teachers in that nation are unlikely to be fired for repeated absenteeism. They have also found that teacher absenteeism continues to persist although many developing countries spend as much as 80–90% of their education budgets on teachers. These researchers conclude that focusing on working conditions is more likely to influence teachers' absenteeism than fear of losing pay. The evidence, both in Latin America and Asia, suggests that facilities with better infrastructure have lower absenteeism. It has been suggested by some researchers that professional development programmes with respect to reinforcing teacher professional motivation may go a long

way in helping to reduce the problem of teacher absenteeism. Others believe that frequent and strategic school inspection may also help.

A 2005 World Bank report on teacher absenteeism in Asian countries cautions that governments and donors may construct school buildings and supply textbooks, but if teachers are repeatedly absent, students are unlikely to learn. The report also argues that high levels of teacher absenteeism are more often than not symptomatic of other problems such as quality control [low morale, alienation, stress] and accountability in education. The professional culture of a school, including the relationship between teachers and administrators, has also been found to affect teacher absenteeism. Implications emerging from this report for us in Trinidad and Tobago are that a government which cannot ensure value for money spent on education is unlikely to be effective at ensuring that students are learning.

The research literature has not excluded Ministries of Education and other educational agencies from the reasons why teacher absenteeism continues to prevail. The view is that educational agencies can help reduce planned teacher absenteeism. It has been recommended that workshops and other meetings for teachers should be conducted on occasions when schools are not active. This may be during school holidays, after school hours, or even on weekends. This approach, however, may raise a hornet's nest in Trinidad and Tobago.

Clearly we are not the only nation that is reeling from the effects of teacher absenteeism. Worldwide, few meaningful solutions have so far emerged. To my mind, only programmes to cultivate among our teachers a sense of patriotism, concern for national development, and professionalism can save the day.

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