

No More Cutting Class?

Creating the right incentives can reduce high rates of absence among teachers—and thus improve learning by students

Improving basic education in developing countries requires, at a minimum, teachers who are present in the classroom and motivated to teach. But recent research shows that teacher absence rates are quite high in some developing-country primary school systems. Moreover, because of poor record keeping and incentives to hide absence, administrative records often understate the problem.

To monitor teacher attendance directly, survey teams carried out surprise visits in 2002–03 to representative random samples of primary schools in eight countries: Bangladesh, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Uganda, and Zambia. Between 11 and 27 percent of teachers were absent from schools at times that they would ordinarily be teaching. Absences were especially high in poorer and more rural areas: average rates reached about 40 percent in the Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand, but 15 percent in the wealthier state of Maharashtra. Similarly, Peru's most remote schools averaged 20 percent absence, compared with 7 percent in Lima.

High levels of teacher absence likely worsen education outcomes. In many developing countries substitute teachers are not available, and single-teacher primary schools must close when the teacher is absent. Studies from India, Indonesia, the United States, and Zambia have associated higher absence with lower student learning. The most convincing evidence comes from the Indian state of Rajasthan, where a randomized experiment that provided attendance incentives, and cut teacher absence by half, substantially increased student test scores.

Additional research has begun to track absence over time, to see whether and how attendance can be improved. In the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh average absence rates stagnated at about 25 percent

for three years, despite interventions that improved other aspects of teacher effort. But in Indonesia and Uganda preliminary evidence suggests that absence fell in the four to five years since the first round of surveys.

Attacking the problem effectively requires knowing who is absent most often and why. In most countries studied, absence is a systemwide problem caused by many teachers, not a small number of “ghost teachers.” Some frequently cited reasons for absence do not hold up to scrutiny. Illness and noneducational duties appear to explain a relatively small share of absences. Low base salaries have also been blamed, on the theory that they cause teachers to moonlight at outside jobs that interfere with teaching. But higher-paid teachers are somewhat more likely than others to be absent.

A lack of accountability and incentives for performance probably explains more of the problem. Absence is higher among high-ranking teachers, who are harder to hold accountable; in remote schools and lower-income areas, where supervision is weakest; and in public schools compared with nearby private schools (which are better able to discipline teachers). In most developing-world school systems, teacher compensation is largely unrelated to performance. Not all teachers take advantage of this lack of accountability and incentives: most are usually at their post, trying to teach in what are often difficult conditions. But when teachers lack the professionalism to meet their responsibilities, they usually are not held accountable.

How can policy makers tackle teacher absence and, more broadly, improve the accountability and performance of teachers? First, focus greater policy attention on teacher effort, and on measuring attendance accurately, perhaps through independent audits like those carried out by researchers. In addition, policy makers should experiment with promising approaches for improving effort. The best bet is to focus on improving teachers' marginal incentives—the incentives they face each morning when deciding whether to attend school.

One approach is to link teachers' pay or progression directly to measures of performance. A recent evaluation of a performance-based bonus system for teachers in Israel concluded that it increased student achievement, primarily through greater teacher effort and responsiveness to student needs. In North Carolina a policy charging teachers for excess sick leave reduced absence. An experiment in Rajasthan monitored teacher attendance using cameras and then based part of the teachers' salary on their attendance rates. Not only did attendance improve; so did student learning. In Kenya an experiment with incentive pay based on gains in student test scores found that the program increased learning, though perhaps only as a result of “teaching to the test.” By contrast, a larger-scale experiment in government schools in Andhra Pradesh found that when teachers were paid bonuses based on their students' learning rates, teacher attendance rates did not improve but student learning did.

Details of the incentive design matter. In some cases teachers have responded adversely to incentives—by reducing collaboration with one another, excluding low-performing students from classes, cheating on tests, lessening the academic rigor of classes, or “teaching to the test” to the detriment of other subjects and skills.

Other approaches are also promising. Some governments reformed the way teachers are monitored and evaluated and based promotions or raises on these evaluations. Finally, policy makers may be able to improve teacher performance through nonmonetary incentives. If teachers find their work environment to be more pleasant and more conducive to student learning, they are less likely to avoid it.

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