

*IIEP research and studies programme*

**The management of  
teachers**

**Reducing teacher absenteeism  
and attrition:**

causes, consequences and responses

*David W. Chapman*



International Institute for Educational Planning

Reducing teacher absenteeism and attrition:  
causes, consequences and responses

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Reducing teacher absenteeism  
and attrition:  
causes, consequences and responses

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## The management of teachers

In many parts of the world, especially in countries facing structural adjustment policies and cuts in the education budget, planners and decision-makers are presently becoming more and more interested in containing the investment in teaching staff, particularly in optimizing the deployment and utilization of the teaching force available.

In this perspective, decision-makers, planners and administrators have to address crucial questions such as:

- Are teachers equally distributed among the different areas and schools in the country?
- What kind of measures can help overcoming such imbalances?
- How can trained teachers who are presently overstaffing the offices of public administrations be redeployed?
- How can a better match be achieved between the requirements of a teaching post and the profile and motivation of the teaching staff available?
- What must be done to ensure that the *right people* are allocated or promoted to posts of higher levels of responsibility and remuneration?
- Which policies and structures of teacher remuneration and promotion can help improve the motivation and utilization of teachers?

Related to the issue of better teacher deployment and utilization are questions about the possible ways of enhancing teachers' actual presence on the job, how to make sure that the teachers deployed are provided with the necessary level of knowledge and skills required to do their job

properly; and about the modes of teaching: double shift; multiple grade; school subject clusters, etc., to be set up in different specific contexts.

The general objective of the IIEP project is to analyze present problems, strategies and practices of teacher deployment and eventually to identify and help in defining and developing efficient policies and management tools in this area.

More specifically, the project aims to:

- identify – on the basis of several country monographs and case studies – relevant policies, strategies and instruments for addressing the major problems of teacher deployment and utilization;
- develop appropriate tools and indicators for the diagnosis and monitoring of teacher deployment and utilization;
- contribute to building up national capacities in the field of teachers deployment through the development of context-related teaching materials.

The policies and management systems used in the posting, transfer, promotion, utilization and redeployment of teachers will be given particular attention.

Efforts to optimize the utilization of the teaching staff are frequently hampered by high rates of absenteeism and attrition among teachers which can be considered as a waste of scarce resources and a threat to instructional quality. In the present monograph, D.W. Chapman discusses the extent to which the above-mentioned phenomena jeopardize cost-effective teacher utilization and investigates the various factors which cause or contribute to teacher absenteeism and attrition. Possible solutions to the problems described and their respective implications are subsequently presented and also a framework for the assessment of potential policy responses in different contexts sketched out.

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# Chapter I

## Overview

### 1. *Introduction*

Declining school quality and efficiency are two of the most serious problems in various parts of the Third World. Over the last decade many countries have experienced a rapidly increasing demand for education, a decline in national resources available to support education, and a drop in teacher quality and preparation – the result of expanding the education system faster than qualified teachers could be recruited or trained. Within this broader framework, two issues are seen as particular threats to sustained improvement in educational quality – high *teacher absenteeism* and high *teacher turnover*. High rates of teacher absenteeism cut to the heart of student learning by denying pupils direct instructional time. Teacher attrition, while quite a different phenomenon, poses just as serious a problem. The loss of experienced teachers is seen as a threat to instructional quality. Even more importantly, attrition is seen as a waste of scarce resources, as replacement teachers have to be recruited and trained. Teacher training is expensive. The investment is lost when teachers, once trained, leave teaching.

This monograph examines the causes and potential solutions to teacher absenteeism and teacher attrition. It is aimed at providing practical suggestions for how education ministries, schools, and communities can help reduce absenteeism and encourage teacher retention. A key argument, however, is that the causes and conditions that affect these practices vary from country-to-country. This monograph provides a framework which educators and government officials can use to evaluate the sources and solutions to these problems within their own countries.



There are no magic potions or silver bullets. With the possible exception of a massive salary increase, there is no single action that can solve either one of these problems. Rather, they require a concerted programme of action that simultaneously address a series of issues that influence teachers' professional decisions.

The monograph is organized in five chapters. *Chapter I* explains why the incidence of teacher absenteeism and attrition have grown to the point of posing a national problem. *Chapter II* examines teacher attrition, hence enabling: (i) to determine the extent to which it really is a problem, and (ii) to suggest ways in which teacher attrition might be reduced. *Chapter III* examines the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to absenteeism. *Chapter IV* offers a framework that education and government decision-makers can use to select and evaluate possible solutions to high turnover and absenteeism within the context of their own country situations. Finally, *Chapter V* focusses on a summary and conclusions.

The problems of high absenteeism and turnover have their roots in the recent history of education systems development in many Third World countries. Education systems grew rapidly, in response to both increasing population and increasing participation rates. The rapid growth in the teaching force put great strain on national education budgets, even at a time that many countries were experiencing serious economic and fiscal problems. As money became tighter, some governments cut back on textbooks, instructional materials, instructional supervision, school construction and maintenance and let teachers' salaries fall behind the rate of inflation. Management capacity did not keep up with system growth either. Operating procedures did not change to accommodate the expanding system; staff were promoted into administrative positions without adequate training; and, managers tended to lose personal knowledge of what was going on in the schools. The convergence of these factors left countries with less well qualified teachers in front of large classes, often in poor facilities, without textbooks or other forms of instructional assistance in a system managed by staff poorly prepared for their responsibilities. Quality of education dropped sharply.

When James began teaching 10 years ago, he was enthusiastic about his job – but two things changed. His salary increases did not keep up with inflation (which averaged 16 per cent a year) and he had five children. After his second child arrived, he took a part-time job after school keeping books for a local export company. It paid well. Now he regularly misses 1-2 days a week from school to spend more time keeping books. With five children, he cannot afford not to.

Governments are now realizing that low educational quality has serious negative consequences on the continued development of other sectors of the economy. Improvements in health, agriculture, and commerce all depend on an educated workforce. This has led to a renewed commitment in many countries to upgrade the quality and efficiency of education. An essential part of this commitment in virtually all of these countries is to upgrade the effectiveness of the teaching force. Teachers mediate students' encounter with content; they control the classroom activities most directly related to learning. Upgrading teachers is one of the most direct ways of influencing pedagogical practices at the school and classroom level. Consequently, teacher training is the single most widely employed strategy (by itself or with other strategies) to improve instructional quality in the Third World (Chapman ; Snyder, 1992).

However, in many countries, teachers, once trained, tend to leave teaching. This has led to a widespread interest in identifying ways that a country's investment in its teachers can be protected.

To a great extent, high levels of teacher absenteeism and attrition can be explained by low teacher morale which, in turn, is due largely to (a) a lack of financial and other incentives for teachers, (b) inappropriate recruitment and promotion policies, and (c) weak administrative support for teachers (e.g., late paychecks, poor communications, etc.). But the issues are complicated.

Knowing what causes a problem and being able to fix it are different things.

Since the beginning of secondary school, Ali had wanted to learn English, go to the university, and then get a job with the soap company, the largest employer in his town. He was terribly upset when he did not receive admission to the university. After some thought, he decided to attend a three-year teacher training programme. He did not really ever expect to teach, but he figured that the training programme would give him the skills he needed to get a managerial job. He was right. Soon after he finished the training programme, he started as an assistant in the front office of the soap company.

## 2. *Separating the issues*

Teacher absenteeism and teacher turnover are quite different matters. While they stem from similar causes, they respond to quite different solutions. Lumping them together as 'teacher problems' masks important differences in how these two issues need to be addressed. For example, while teacher absenteeism has a consistently corrosive impact on educational quality, teacher turnover may have an overall positive effect on the economy of a country (though not necessarily benefiting the education system). This monograph will treat the issues separately and argue that education ministries need to follow different strategies in dealing with the two problems.

## Chapter II

# Teacher turnover

### 1. *How big is the problem?*

Teacher turnover rates differ dramatically across countries – not surprising, given country’s widely varying economic and social conditions. What is surprising are the different ideas about what level is acceptable and how much is too much. While the education ministry in Botswana worries about a 3 per cent turnover of secondary school teachers, nearby Lesotho would be pleased to reduce teacher turnover to 15 per cent. How much is enough? *Table 1* reports recent estimates of teacher turnover from selected countries. What the numbers mean depend on a fuller understanding of the country context in which they occur. While high turnover can signal low teacher morale or serious salary imbalances, low turnover can indicate stagnation in the teaching force (if younger, more recently trained teachers cannot find teaching positions).

The costs of high turnover cannot be underestimated. Many top education officials see it as a major constraint on efforts to improve educational quality (as experienced teachers leave the field) and efficiency (as the investment in teacher training is lost). But things are in fact more complicated. *First*, the key efficiency argument, that the benefits of money invested in recruitment and training is lost if graduates leave for jobs in other fields, is questionable. Regarding turnover as entirely negative may represent a short view. While the benefits of teacher training may be lost to the education system, they often are an important ingredient in the larger national development of the country. The problem, of course, is that the education sector ends up financing this benefit with resources that are much needed to improve the quality of schooling.

Table 1. Teacher turnover rates in selected countries

Country	Teacher Turnover	Source
Liberia (pre-civil war)	Primary teacher turnover estimated by Ministry of Education (MOE) officials at 20-30 per cent annually.	Government of Liberia (1988) (p.4-13)
Nepal	50 per cent of primary teachers are permanent; 50 per cent are temporary. Annual attrition rate of temporary primary teachers is estimated at 20 per cent; attrition of permanent primary teachers is estimated at 1.5 per cent	Government of Nepal (1988) (p.4-27)
Yemen	Over 80 per cent of primary and secondary school teachers are expatriates. Government policy is to 'Yemenize' the teaching force. To the extent this is accomplished, turnover of teachers will be high, as expatriates leave their positions.	Government of Yemen (1986) (p.4-20, 5-15, 5-16)
Botswana	Annual primary teacher attrition is estimated at 8 per cent; secondary teacher attrition at 4 per cent.	Government of Botswana (1990)
Somalia (pre-civil war)	'Permanent' teachers often do not stay beyond their third year.	Government of Somalia (1984) (p.6-39)
Haiti	Estimated by school directors to be 5-10 per cent per year among secondary school teachers.	Government of Haiti (1987) (p. 6-16)
USA	Four years after completing teacher training, 40.4 per cent of the males and 28 per cent of the females were still employed as teachers.	Charters (1970)
	About 27 per cent of students who complete teacher training never enter teaching or leave teaching within the first five years.	Chapman ; Hutcheson, (1982).
	About 25 per cent of teachers leave teaching	Mark ; Anderson (1978)

More importantly, but often overlooked, is the nature of the attrition – the best teachers are the ones most likely to leave teaching, largely because the strongest teachers are the one with the most employment alternatives. The weakest teachers, lacking alternatives, tend to stay in teaching.

*Second*, teacher turnover generally in itself is not the primary teacher issue of concern to educational planners. Rather, the central concern is the escalating cost of the teaching force. The interest in reducing teacher attrition is generally a concern about reducing the cost associated with that turnover.

Hassan has always wanted to be a teacher. After secondary school, he attended a three-year teacher training programme. Upon graduation, he was assigned to a small village a long way from the city in which he had grown up. At first, he was excited by the prospect of being able to try out the new ideas about teaching that he had learned in his training. The villagers were nice to him and helped him find a place to live. However, as the year progressed, he quickly became disillusioned. The first hint of trouble was when the textbooks did not arrive in time for the beginning of school. Hassan sent a message to the District Education Office letting them know the problem, but he heard nothing in return. Some textbooks did arrive four months later, but only a quarter of the number needed. As the year progressed, his problems grew. When Hassan tried to introduce more student discussion and peer work-groups (things he had learned in his training programme), the students were not very responsive. When he did succeed in getting them into work-groups, parents started to complain. They thought that if he knew the material, he should just tell the students. The headmaster in Hassan's school sided with the parents. By the end of the year, Hassan was deeply discouraged. Perhaps this was the reason that he was so receptive when a cousin told him about a position in the Ministry of Agriculture keeping track of export certificates.

## 2. *Causes of turnover*

Two types of factors must be examined in considering the causes of turnover: (1) *root causes*, which must be addressed if turnover is to be reduced, and (2) *enabling factors* which do not themselves cause teacher attrition, but are conditions which allow it to continue, once it starts.

*Root causes*, which directly lead to teacher attrition include:

### (i) *Economic incentives that encourage turnover*

Qualified teachers leave teaching at the point that compensation differs significantly from what they could make in other jobs. Teacher attrition can be effectively eliminated by raising salaries high enough. Governments already know that. But retaining the teaching force is not the only or necessarily the most important problem these governments face. Rather, the real question is how to retain trained teachers in the teaching force at the lowest possible cost. The policy issue of concern is weighting the costs of attrition against the costs of retention.

Raising teacher salaries is most effective in lowering drop-out when it improves teachers' financial position relative to *people employed in other jobs*. Countries that have implemented sweeping salary increases of all public sector employees contribute to inflation without changing the position of teachers relative to those employed in other fields.

With the skills provided by teacher training, graduates are qualified for jobs in the private sector or in other government agencies that pay better than teaching and typically do not put the individual at risk of being assigned to a rural location. In economic terms, training raises the opportunity cost of being a teacher. However, sometimes economic incentives for turnover are sparked by larger social and political changes beyond the control of any particular government. For example, in Lesotho, teachers being lured across the border to teach in South Africa for much higher salaries.

### (ii) *Lack of incentives that could offset turnover*

Low salaries can sometimes be offset by non-monetary incentives (Kemmerer, 1990, 1993). This has led many countries to search for a

combination of low-cost or non-monetary incentives that can hold teachers in the field. This monograph will review the recent experience with non-monetary incentives that can be influenced by central ministries of education. However, at the same time, recent research suggests that many of the common assumptions about what benefits have incentive value to teachers need to be re-examined (Chapman ; Mahlck, 1993).

*(iii) Government policies that inadvertently encourage turnover*

In some countries the incentives to participate in teacher training are greater than those for actually being employed as a teacher. For example, in Yemen in the mid-1980s, the stipend paid to students enrolled in teacher education programmes at the university was greater than the amount they could earn as a practising teacher. Consequently, many students pursued teacher training, then took a different type of job to avoid a loss of income after graduation.

*(iv) Poor working conditions*

Teachers are often expected to live in rural locations that lack many of the amenities of an urban setting and work in classrooms that are poorly equipped. As the education sector of many countries have come under increasing financial strain and the conditions of being a teacher (relative to other types of employment) become worse, morale drops, and alternative types of employment look relatively more attractive.

*(v) Limited alternative access to higher education.*

In countries with limited access to university education, teacher training is often seen as a 'back door' route to higher education. Trainees pursue teacher education, not from an interest in a teaching career, but from a desire to transfer to the university in another subject area.

*(vi) National efforts to improve quality of instruction may make teaching less attractive*

Teacher sometimes resist educational reform efforts, even when the proposed changes appear to raise student achievement or to operate in the



best interest of the school. One possible explanation for this resistance is the “worklife complexity hypothesis”. By altering the activities of the classroom, instructional interventions may seriously impinge on the worklife of teachers. Virtually all innovations increase the complexity of teacher worklife by expecting them to use different instructional materials, teach in new ways, or learn new content. The increased complexity often leads to teacher resistance to the innovation. This creates an irony: “Effort to improve the quality of instruction generally result in more work for the teacher, which can diminish the attractiveness of teaching and result in higher rates of teacher attrition”.

*Enabling factors include:*

(vii) *The quality and relevance of teacher training*

One reason for the low morale that can lead to teacher attrition is that teachers are poorly prepared for the challenges of the classroom. If they lack the skills to prepare and deliver content, maintain classroom discipline, and manage the flow of class activities, they can quickly become discouraged. It is not uncommon in some countries for teachers to have only 2-3 grades of schooling more than the children they teach. Even teachers with more education may lack the pedagogical skills or solid grounding in the particular content they are expected to cover. For these teachers, understanding and presenting new content, answering student questions, and trying new teaching methods are hard work. Ministry demands for higher quality instruction tend to drive these individuals out of teaching. Indeed, quality of first teaching experience is one of the major predictors of teacher dropout. Teachers who have a difficult first year are much more likely to seek alternative employment. Ironically, this is one of the easiest problems to remedy.

A well supervised student teaching experience and good supervision during their first year on the job can do much to ensure that a new teacher is successful. In practice, new teachers often do not get that support.

(viii) *Community apathy*

Several strategies for reducing turnover require the support and involvement of the local community. Some communities lack the necessary interest in or commitment to education. Others are over-

whelmed by the multiple demands on local resources and interest from other sectors, such as health, local government, and natural resources. For whatever reason it occurs, community apathy can fuel teacher turnover.

### 3. *Consequences and complexities of turnover*

Even within the education system, the costs and benefits of attrition are more complicated than may be readily apparent. Much depends on which teachers leave the field. In countries making serious efforts to introduce new curricula and teaching methods, turnover provides an important opportunity to introduce fresh thinking and new ideas into the education system. From this point of view, attrition should be selectively encouraged (perhaps by targeting incentives for retention to those judged to be more effective teachers). As new curriculum and new pedagogical techniques are introduced, it may be easier and less expensive to train new teachers than to re-train some of the existing teachers in the new methods. While, for the most part, attrition has a negative impact on overall system efficiency, its impact needs to be considered on a country-specific basis. Generalizations may not travel well. Among others, the following issues need to be considered:

- *The more effective the education system is in sparking economic development, the more attractive employment opportunities teacher are likely to have, and the harder it will be to retain them in teaching.* In some respects, teacher retention is a self-defeating goal. One desired outcome of an effective education system is a trained workforce that, over time, contributes to a more productive economy. Yet, as the economy of a country improves, teachers will have more alternative employment opportunities and teacher attrition can be expected to increase. Teacher training, then, is an uphill battle. The better the economy, the greater the teacher turn-over.
- *Teacher attrition may be good for other sectors of the economy, as individuals with good skills and training undertake private sector enterprise.* Teacher training has long been used as an alternative to university training for acquiring the credentials and skills that provide access to higher level employment opportunities. From a

wider national perspective, this strategy is attractive. Teacher training can be less expensive than other training programmes. It also poses less risk of 'brain drain'. Since a teaching certificate gives recipients less career mobility than a university degree, they are less likely to leave the country. From the perspective of larger national development, teacher training can be a 'good buy'.

- *Many of the potential solutions to teacher attrition have political or financial costs that the government may judge to be greater than the cost of attrition.* Often ministries undertake policies they know are likely to lead to greater teacher turnover, not because they seek higher attrition, but because they are seeking to solve some immediate problem at the time. For example, during an era of rapidly increasing enrolments, many countries accepted unqualified teachers into the teaching force just to put an adult in each classroom, with little regard for a recruit's initial commitment to teaching, knowledge of the content, or teaching ability. These teachers are likely to have higher turnover due to their poor preparation. Eventually, the government will want them out, as it is able to afford better qualified replacements.
- *There is often a tension between actions that encourage retention and those that encourage better instructional practices.* Recent research suggests that the provision of certain types of incentives can increase teachers' career satisfaction and, in turn, may increase their persistence in teaching. However, those incentives have little, if any, effect on shaping teachers' actual classroom instruction. (For example, the provision of subsidized housing may result in a happier teacher, but probably does not result in that teacher using different instructional methods in the classroom.) In fact, success in raising teachers' satisfaction might make changing teachers' instructional practices more difficult; the more satisfied teachers are, the less pressure they may feel to change. This irony poses a problem only if teachers' instructional practices need to change – if teachers generally are employing effective pedagogy, the efforts to increase career satisfaction would not necessarily undercut instructional quality. Unfortunately, in most countries this is not the case. Raising instructional quality is as important as reducing teacher turnover.

- *The marginal cost of lowering attrition increases as attrition decreases.* Reducing turnover from 25 per cent to 15 per cent is generally easier to accomplish than moving it from 5 per cent to 3 per cent. A major haemorrhage in the teaching workforce usually signals a single, big problem which, if fixed, can staunch the exodus. However, when turnover is relatively low and the goal is to make it lower, no single intervention is likely to have a major impact. Rather, it will require a coordinated effort to adjust many factors. A corollary to this observation is that the major causes of teacher attrition tend to differ at different stages of national development. At early stages of economic and institutional development, turnover may be associated with changing requirements in training and teacher preparation. At later stages, it might be related to a positive demand for skilled personnel in business and industries that pay more than teaching.
- *Incentives tend to have diminishing value.* An incentive, when widely available, may lose its incentive value. What starts as an incentive eventually may come to be seen as an entitlement. Teachers may feel penalized by its absence. For example, subsidized housing might initially be effective as an incentive to encourage teachers to accept more remote assignments. However, when nearly all teachers receive housing as part of their contract, it becomes a baseline expectation and loses its impact as a reward. The failure to provide housing would then be seen as a punishment. The policy implication of this diminishing value is that the nature and mix of incentives needs to change over time. What works as incentives in one era may not work several years later. Hence, a strategy of combating turnover through the use of targeted incentives requires constant review and refining.

#### 4. *Designing strategies for encouraging teacher retention*

*What kinds of management strategies and incentive systems can education officials use to reduce teacher turnover?* Because so many factors can influence attrition, it is easy for policy-makers to get lost in the maze of possibilities, pursuing less important options while overlooking more important alternatives. Effective policy formulation begins by

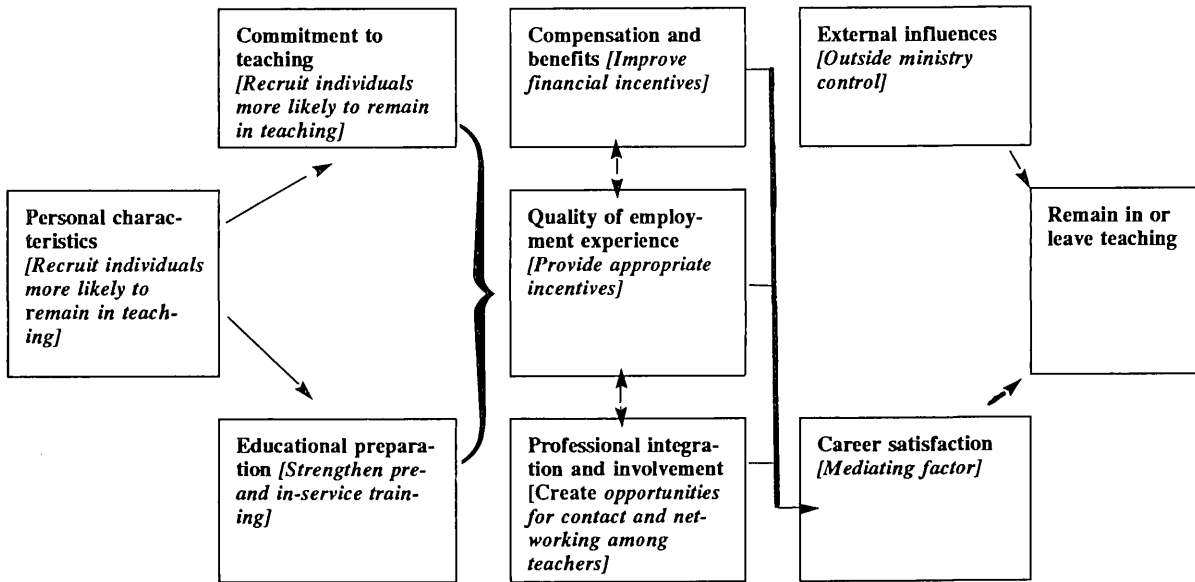
imposing some organization on the multiple possibilities, so that the feasibility and appropriateness of alternative options can be evaluated within the context of a given country. *Figure 1* offers a model that summarizes factors associated with teacher retention.

Teacher retention is a function of (a) teachers' personal characteristics, (b) educational preparation, (c) commitment to teaching, (d) educational preparation, (e) professional integration into teaching, (f) external influences (such as employment climate). These six factors together influence career satisfaction, which in turn, relates to teachers' decisions to remain in or leave teaching (Chapman ; Green, 1986; Chapman, 1984). Some of these categories are more important than others in encouraging retention. Some categories are more easily impacted by central government policies and procedures. Any incentive system needs to be based on a realistic understanding of which strategies and rewards work.

*In Figure 1*, the bold headings represent the general categories of factors that influence teacher turnover. The *italics* captions underneath each heading describe the types of actions that educators, government officials, and community members can take to reduce turnover. These actions are then described in greater detail in the next section, with suggestions for specific interventions and a discussion of the probable impact and trade-offs associated with each.

The model outlined in *Figure 1* is a practical device for summarizing a lot of individual possibilities into some general categories which can then be evaluated. Formulation of the model is a first step in answering three key questions:

- What factors can help reduce teacher attrition?
- Can an increase in some factors offset a deficit in others?
- Which offer the lowest cost relative to their impact?



Source: Adapted from Chapman, D.W. (1983), "A model of the influences on teacher retention", *Journal of Teacher Education*, 24, 5, pp.43-49.

Figure 1. A model of the factors associated with teacher turnover

The following section suggests concrete actions that governments can take to help reduce teacher turnover, a brief analysis of the likely impact of each intervention, and possible cross-impacts the action might have on other goals the government is also trying to achieve. As these analyses will indicate, most actions have both positive and negative consequences. Solving one problem may only create another, possibly more serious, problem. Consequently, there are no 'quick-fixes' to teacher turnover, only hard choices. Later in this monograph, a strategy will be proposed for evaluating the feasibility and appropriateness of these strategies within the context and needs of any particular country.

## 5. *Summary of possible strategies to reduce teacher attrition*

### (a) **Recruit individuals more likely to remain in teaching**

- *Recruit individuals with higher initial commitment to teaching*

Research on teacher turnover in the USA indicate that the single most important predictor of retention is teachers' initial commitment to teaching as a career. Those with stronger commitment are more likely to remain in teaching. If a country has the luxury of having more qualified applicants than they have teaching positions, initial commitment to teaching can be an important basis on which to sort applicants. However, few countries have a surplus of qualified applicants. Moreover, initial commitment does not necessarily predict that the individual will necessarily be a good teacher. Initial commitment to teaching can generally be determined through an admissions interview at the time individuals apply to enter teacher training. The most effective means for ascertaining commitment is to directly ask applicants about their long-term interest in teaching as a career. Applicants who appear to have given little thought to teaching as a career are probably at higher risk of leaving the field than those who have eagerly anticipated being a teacher. This does not mean that individuals with lower initial commitment should not be accepted into teacher training or given a teaching position. Rather, the goal of these interviews is to identify those at the lower

extreme, those who show little intention of ever entering a classroom.

- *Recruit more women teachers*

In some countries there are powerful cultural pressures that operate to exclude some population groups from teaching. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the under-utilization of women in the teaching force due to religious and social beliefs about the role of women. Some countries where women's professional opportunities in teaching have been limited are now taking a new look at ways to increase the participating of women in the teaching force. Attrition among women is likely to be lower because of their limited range of alternative employment opportunities in those countries.

- *Recruit individuals with stronger ties to their community*

One reason for drop-out is teachers' reactions to being assigned to remote areas, far away from family and friends, and which offer limited social and professional opportunities. A teacher retention strategy used by some countries is to emphasize the recruitment of teachers from those remote communities, so that teachers see their assignment as an opportunity to be in their home location. Some countries have built their teacher-training colleges in remote areas to allow trainees to take their training close to home. This has a secondary benefit of limiting their access to urban areas where they might create opportunities and tastes that would make a more remote assignment less appealing.

## **(b) Strengthen teacher training**

- *Provide adequate pre-service teacher training*

The impact of training on retention is complicated and somewhat contradictory. One cause of teacher turn-over is that teachers do not feel competent in the course content or the pedagogical skills they need to run a class effectively. Turnover can be reduced by providing these teachers with the content knowledge and pedagogical skills they need to do their job more easily. As teachers are better able to



cope with the demands of teaching, they are more likely to remain in the field.

But training has a downside. Providing teachers with new and stronger skills also makes them more competitive for other types of employment. It is not uncommon for teachers to use pre-service training as a route of mobility out of teaching. Take the case of pre-civil war Liberia. A tracer study of 100 graduates of Liberian rural teacher training institutes indicated that only 25 were teaching three years later (Government of Liberia, 1988).

Other job opportunities are not the only temptation. In some countries, teacher training is an alternative route of access to university admissions for students who were not directly eligible out of secondary school. Teacher training may attract individuals with little commitment or inclination to pursue teaching as a career. Limiting admission to teacher training to individuals highly committed to teaching as a career is one of the more effective means of reducing subsequent teacher attrition.

Moreover, pre-service training is expensive. Not only is the training itself expensive but teachers, once trained, command higher salaries, thereby increasing the recurrent cost of education. Given that pre-service training is expensive and has a mixed impact retention, it should not be a first-line strategy to combat teacher turnover. While pre-service training is vitally important, its importance lies in its impact on instructional quality, not teacher retention.

- *Provide in-service training*

In-service training has been advocated by some as a better strategy (than pre-service) because it targets individuals who have already made a commitment to teaching and, presumably, are less likely to leave teaching once they acquire their new skills. Moreover, in-service training typically does not provide credentials with the same level of credibility and marketability as does pre-service training. Nonetheless, the risk remains that in-service training aimed at providing the knowledge and skills that reduce the complexity of teaching also increase recipients' career mobility. The net impact of in-service on retention may be neutralized by the cross-impact of some using the training to leave teaching while others use it to gain the skills they need to remain in teaching.

**(c) Improve the financial rewards for those who enter teaching**

- *Increased government salary for teachers*

Low salaries is the most frequent reason teachers give for leaving teaching. Their concern is well grounded. In many countries, teacher compensation has dropped in real terms (income adjusted for inflation), as salaries have increased more slowly than the rate of inflation, and in relative terms, as teachers have more attractive employment alternatives. Indeed, in most countries the teacher shortages are directly related to decreasing salaries (Farrell ; Oliveira, 1993, p.1). Qualified teachers leave teaching at the point that compensation differs significantly from what they could make in other jobs.

Raising teachers' salaries is the single most direct and effective way to reduce attrition. Teacher attrition can be virtually eliminated by raising salaries high enough. While effective, this may not be very practical. Governments face competing demands for resources and can seldom afford the level of salary that would guarantee retention, financially or politically. The challenge for government, then, is to reach an acceptable balance between level of teacher turnover and resources committed to education.

- *Allow and support alternative income producing opportunities for teachers*

If government does not have the money for increased salaries, an alternative approach is to allow teachers to earn additional monies through out-of-school activities. By giving teachers the opportunity and flexibility to increase their income without leaving teaching, the hope is to retain more teachers in teaching. In some countries teachers are hired to offer evening literacy classes or other types of non-formal education (e.g. pre-civil war Somalia). In other countries it has taken the form of private tutoring (e.g. Egypt). In practice, this strategy has encountered two problems. First, government supported alternatives, such as non-formal education or literacy courses, generally do not pay much. More importantly, these alternative activities may come to compete with the teachers' daytime responsibilities. For example, in one Middle Eastern country,

teachers tended to fail students in their formal studies as a means of ensuring a clientele for their private tutoring.

- *Special salary increases for longevity*

In practice, the salary scale in most countries rewards seniority. Increasing the magnitude of these increments is a direct way to reward more experienced teachers for remaining in teaching. However, this is most effective if the increments result in a salary competitive with what experienced teachers could earn in other jobs that might be open to them.

- *Merit pay*

Teachers with the strongest skills generally have the most career alternatives. But those are the teachers an education system most needs to retain. Merit pay has been offered as one means of targeting incentives to the best teachers. Unfortunately, merit pay works better in theory than in practice. The practical problems of implementation are daunting. There is surprisingly little consensus about the basis for awarding merit (e.g. student achievement, observation of teaching practice, etc.), disagreement about who should decide which teachers deserve merit, and problems in pairing the pay with the meritorious behaviour quickly enough to have the desired psychological effect. Merit pay has been widely criticized as divisive and demoralizing, particularly if a few teachers receive it frequently and others seldom or never. If implemented properly, merit pay provides a means of encouraging the best teachers to remain in teaching. In practice, it runs the risk of contributing to higher teacher turnover if it demoralizes the teaching force.

- *Increased allowances*

Separate from salary, teachers are often given special allowances for such things as teaching in remote locations, taking on special tasks, etc. Allowances differ from salary because they are given to reward (or compensate) a specific task or responsibility and they do not change the teacher's base salary. In many countries they can be

awarded by education ministry officials, without the concurrence of the Ministries of Finance, which may control base salary levels.

- *Increase benefits (health, retirement, etc.)*

In some countries, improving fringe benefits is easier to do than increasing salary. However, for increased benefits to have much effect on keeping teachers in teaching, salaries already need to be nearly equal to those the teacher could secure in other fields.

- *Subsidized housing*

Subsidizing teacher housing is generally intended to encourage teachers to move to remote locations. However, in some countries the practice has become so widespread that it has come to be considered a basic prerequisite. In locations in which housing is in short supply, the threat of losing the housing associated with being a teacher is sometimes a sufficient incentive for teachers to think carefully about giving it up.

- *Community subsidy of teachers salaries*

In some countries, local communities subsidize teacher salaries as a means of ensuring that good teachers stay in their community. The subsidy may be a cash payment, but more often comes as food and other gifts. Local community subsidy of teachers is widely thought to be particularly effective because community members generally have a better day-to-day basis for judging how good a teacher is than does the central ministry. Subsidies can be targeted to teachers the community thinks is doing a particularly good job.

However, community subsidies can work both ways. Communities often are quite conservative and may not understand or share government's support of new curriculum or pedagogical practices. For example, in several countries, communities have expressed considerable displeasure when the national curriculum was revised to give less attention to religious instruction. Similarly, teachers efforts to emphasize more student discussion and peer-group work has not always been well received by parents, who interpreted it as a breakdown in the traditional discipline and order of a classroom.

Community subsidies can be used to reinforce the *status quo* as well as to encourage good teachers to remain in teaching.

**(d) Improve the quality of teachers' worklife**

- *Job security*

Job security can be an attractive feature, capable of enticing some teachers who would otherwise leave teaching to remain. However, teachers in most countries already have considerable job security; countries in which it remains available as an incentive to encourage retention are the exception. Moreover, high levels of job security have a downside. In most most developed and industrialized countries, the entrenchment of weak teachers is a more troubling problem than teacher drop-out.

- *Increase the status and prestige of teaching*

Teachers enjoy a level of status and prestige disproportionate to their salary. This special social standing of teachers has long operated as a powerful enticement to enter and remain in teaching. However, one of the most common complaints of teachers worldwide is that this status is eroding. The erosion is variously attributed to changing social values, the diminished uniqueness of being educated as more community members have literacy skills similar or better to those of the teachers, community perceptions about declining quality of those entering teaching, and the general politicization of education. Whatever the cause, central education ministries and local communities can sometimes help offset this erosion through actions that signal the continuing value of teachers to the community and the country. For example, special days honouring teachers, special awards for teachers and, most importantly, the continuing acknowledgement of the importance of teachers in the speeches and public pronouncements of key public figures can all help enhance the status and prestige of teachers. Often, however, the most motivating type of status is the day-to-day respect that teachers receive from those around them – parents thanking them, shopkeepers acknowledging the importance of their work, community leaders involving them in

meaningful ways in the life of the community. Government leaders can take the lead and set the tone.

- *Increase community support of teachers*

Community support can range from the personal acknowledgement and respect of community members to direct financial subsidies that supplement their government salary. The psychological effect of both types of support should not be underestimated. Research on teacher attrition has consistently found that recognition and approval of family, friends, supervisors, and community people are important ingredients in teachers' job satisfaction and their decision to remain in or leave teaching.

- *Quality of first teaching experience*

Aspiring teachers sometimes harbour unrealistic ideas of what teaching is really like, so much so that their first experience in front of 30 pupils comes as a shock. Good supervision and support can moderate this reaction and help ensure that the first teaching experience is a good one. Lack of good support can result in floundering and disillusionment. Research on beginning teachers has found that the quality of their first teaching experience is a key predictor of their retention in teaching, regardless of whether that occurs as a student teaching component of their pre-service training or as their first teaching position. This finding suggests that (a) well designed and supervised student teaching experiences within pre-service training programmes and (b) special programmes within schools to protect and support new teachers can help improve long-term career retention of teachers.

- *Provide adequate textbooks and instructional materials*

The adequate and timely provision of textbooks and other instructional materials can influence teacher retention in two ways. *First*, textbooks do much to define the domain of instruction. Good instructional materials make the teacher's job easier by structuring, sequencing, and pacing instruction. *Second*, to the extent that good instructional materials lead to higher levels of student achievement,

teachers accrue much of the credit. This, in turn, can contribute to higher teacher morale and perhaps to greater recognition and approval by parents and community members.

- *Provide more effective school level supervision*

School administrators do much to set the tone of a school – the intangible combination of rapport, respect, and sense of accomplishment that permeates relationships and influences teacher morale. The actions of school administrators influence the sense of pride teachers feel about their school, teachers' sense of personal and professional accomplishment, and how teachers are perceived within the local community, all of which can help encourage teacher retention.

Headmasters have four primary roles within the school – instructional supervision, school management, communication between the school and the Ministry of Education, and developing community-school relationships. In all four areas, headmasters can take very tangible actions that increase teachers willingness to remain in teaching. For example, good management can help ensure that textbooks and supplies are available when they are needed. Work with the community can help create salary incentives for teachers.

**(e) Increase professional integration and involvement**

- *Encourage implementation of teacher support groups*

A key cause of teacher attrition is low morale. This often stems from teachers' recognition that they are poorly prepared for the tasks they face and that they lack personal and professional support needed to gain that preparation within their work setting. Teacher support groups provide a readily available, low-cost, low-threat setting in which teachers can learn content and pedagogical techniques. One approach is for specially trained mentor teachers to hold small group meetings at central locations within their geographical areas. The purpose of these meetings are:

- (i) to demonstrate alternative ways to teach the same material, thereby strengthening teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical repertoire;
- (ii) to engage teachers in discussions of the curriculum – how they would change it and how they would present it differently – thereby strengthening teachers' understanding of the curriculum and expanding their awareness of alternative teaching strategies; and,
- (iii) to provide social/professional contact among teachers around issues of improving practice.

Content of the meetings should be very simple and practical. Emphasis should be on improving current practice rather than on accumulating credentials to move to the next higher professional step. Variations of this idea have been tried in Indonesia (Cianjun Project), where the focus of the meetings was on basic content and pedagogy; in Nepal, where teachers met in regional centres to discuss the in-service training they had received via a weekly radio broadcast; and, in Liberia, where the groups gathered to discuss how to use new programmed instructional materials (never fully implemented due to their civil war). Costs to Government of this activity include training (and continued upgrading) of the mentor teachers, transportation to local centres, limited instructional materials, and refreshments for each meeting. Schools might be expected to cover the cost of teachers' transportation to the centre.

- *Involve teachers more effectively in curriculum and instructional materials development*

Teaching can become repetitive and boring. A moderate professional challenge is a necessary component to keeping teachers engaged and interested in their work which, in turn, are important elements in their decision to remain in teaching. One way to sustain a professional challenge is to involve teachers in the professional decisions that most directly affect their work – formulation of the curriculum, preparation of instructional materials, the design of experiments using locally available materials, etc. For example, in Zimbabwe during the 1980s, the Ministry of Education sponsored a



series of writers' workshops in which teachers were invited to write materials for a new course in environmental and agricultural science.

- *Provide professional seminars and conferences*

Frequent seminars and professional contact with other educators provides opportunities for teachers to develop a network of social relationships with counterparts from other communities. This can reduce teachers' sense of isolation and build a sense of *esprit* that contribute to higher professional morale.

**(f) External influences**

- *Alternative employment opportunities within the country*

External influences refer to such factors as the economic climate of the country and alternative employment opportunities in nearby countries.

- *Alternative employment opportunities outside the country*

For example, Yemen has long had a serious problem retaining Yemeni teachers, because of the ease with which Yemeni men could secure employment in the oil related industries of nearby Saudi Arabia and the cultural restrictions limiting the use of women teachers.

- *Financial situation of the country*

Lesotho experienced a sharp increase in teacher turnover when apartheid ceased, as large numbers of Basotho teachers were recruited to teaching jobs in South Africa at considerably more than they could earn at home. Teacher attrition escalated dramatically in Liberia when the government encountered financial difficulties and was unable to pay salaries on schedule. While external factors have great impact on turnover, they are (by definition) outside the ability of the education sector to affect. At best, a government can only anticipate and prepare.

(g) Career satisfaction

- *Career satisfaction*

Career satisfaction is an important factor in career persistence. Teachers more satisfied with teaching tend to remain in teaching; those less satisfied are more likely to leave. However, it is a *mediating factor* rather than a *primary influence* – it mediates the influence of other factors on teachers' career decisions. Measures of career satisfaction then, may warn of the possibility of high turnover. However, efforts to stem that turnover need to be aimed at the underlying problems salary, morale, training, etc.

Teacher satisfaction has both a political and educational dimension. Teachers constitute the largest portion of the civil service in many countries and the most pervasive and visible government service at the local level. Unhappy teachers are a public relations problem for government. Many governments fear the negative political consequences of widespread and extended dissatisfaction among teachers, quite separate from any consideration of educational quality or workforce stability.

But the primary concerns of most countries *are* educational quality and workforce stability. In these issues, whether or not teachers are satisfied with their careers is not itself an appropriate end-goal, but an intermediate element in the more important consideration of teachers' *behaviour* their decision to enter and remain in teaching, support new educational initiatives, and perform effectively in the classroom. A low level of career satisfaction is a proxy that indicates problems which, if not addressed, may undercut any other efforts being made to improve educational quality. Chronically low levels of career satisfaction can seriously erode government's ability to maintain a qualified teaching force. However, having more satisfied teachers does not by itself ensure more effective or stable teachers.

The afore-mentioned illustrates, while there are numerous actions that can encourage retention, many of those same actions have other less desirable consequences; they are expensive, complicated to implement, or yield uncertain impacts. The issues operate at two levels. There is a criss-cross of competing pressures on teachers that are important in

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mediating their decisions to remain in teaching. At a different level, there are a set of competing pressures on education ministries influencing their decisions about choice of strategy and how far to go in encouraging teacher retention.

But success in encouraging teachers to remain in teaching is only half the battle. Keeping them in teaching is quite different from keeping them in the classroom. In some countries, teacher absenteeism remains a serious problem. The next chapter turns to a consideration of policies and strategies that can help reduce teacher absenteeism.

### *Chapter III*

## Teacher absenteeism

William was pleased to be a teacher. It was not so much because he has always wanted to be a teacher (he had not!), but there were very few other jobs available. Unemployment was over 30 per cent and William counted himself lucky to be employed directly out of secondary school. The salary was painfully low, but it was better than no salary at all. To help compensate for the low salary, William planted and cultivated a 'farm' on a small amount of land the village had allocated to his use. About once a week, he would have his students help him on the farm, a practice he justified as an economic necessity if he was to remain in the village, even though it meant the children did not receive instruction those days.

Once a month William would walk and take public transportation to the District Education Office to pick up his check. It took two days. However, the district headquarters was too small to have a bank where the paychecks could be cashed. A local merchant would cash the checks for a fee of about 25 per cent. The only recourse was to travel another day to a larger town that had a bank. This resulted in another day away from school. William had suggested that the DEO bring cash instead of a paycheck, to avoid the problem of cashing paychecks. However, the DEO explained that when that was tried, too much money was found to be missing. In a typical month William met his class about 4 days a week for 3 of the weeks. The fifth day was spent having the children help him on the farm; the fourth week was spent tracking down and cashing his paycheck.

## 1. *Scope of the problem*

While teacher absenteeism is widely recognized as a serious problem, there is surprisingly little systematic data as to the pervasiveness or extent of the problem. It happens at the local level where few observe it, where those who do observe it are generally powerless to stop it, and where few if any attendance records are maintained that would provide a basis for intervention by higher authorities. Consequently, most of the data as to the pervasiveness of the problem is anecdotal – but none-the-less real. There is widespread consensus that teacher absenteeism is a major threat to educational quality and efficiency in many developing countries.

## 2. *Causes of absenteeism*

Again, it is useful to examine both *root causes* and *enabling factors* of absenteeism.

### 2.1 *Root causes*

#### (i) *Economic incentives for attendance are weak or non-existent*

In some countries, pay scales are so low that teachers must have supplemental employment in order to live. For example, in pre-war Somalia, teacher salaries provided only about 12 per cent of the basic cost of living for a family. As a consequence, teachers were forced to hold outside employment, which often conflicted with their school responsibilities, leading to high rates of absenteeism.

#### (ii) *Government follows policies that encourage absenteeism*

For example, in pre-civil war Liberia, paycheck distribution required that teachers leave the school, often for a week at a time, to travel to the District Education Office to pick up their pay checks. To cash the paycheck, it was often necessary for teachers to either pay a large service fee to a local merchant or, alternatively, to travel to a larger city where there was a bank, resulting in further time away from school. While the government policy had been designed to help avoid corruption by having teachers pick up their own checks, its unintended impact was to increase

teacher absenteeism. The absenteeism was hard to combat, since it was caused by the interaction of government policies.

## 2.2 *Enabling factors*

### (i) *Lack of supervision within the school*

Because classroom teaching occurs in relative isolation from central, regional, and even district authority, few people outside the school or community know much about the diligence with which individual teachers approach their work. It falls to those in the school and community to monitor the day-to-day behaviour of teachers. Enforcing teacher attendance requirements necessarily has to happen at these levels, or not at all. Yet, in some countries, the headmaster's job description does not include enforcing attendance policies. In other countries, headmasters may not have any effective means of rewarding teachers for good attendance or sanctioning teachers who are frequently absent. Even if headmasters recognize the problem, there is little they can do about it.

### (ii) *Lack of local community influence over teacher behaviour*

Often in countries with a highly centralized education system only the central education ministry has any direct authority over the terms of teachers' employment. Local communities have little or no influence over teachers' terms of employment or formal ability to sanction or reward their day-to-day behaviour (such as regular attendance). Consequently, teachers may not feel much responsibility to the local community. If the education ministry does not have sufficient resources for regular and frequent supervision of teachers, teachers may take advantage of the situation.

### (iii) *Lack of appropriate sanctions*

Even if district or regional officials recognize the problem and wish to address it, they often lack an appropriate range of intermediate responses. There are few manageable interventions between simple reprimands, on one hand, and firing the teacher, on the other hand. Reprimands are too often ignored and terminating employment is seen as overkill (especially if replacement teachers are hard to find). While

assessing fines or withholding salary are possibilities, the mechanics of implementing those sanctions are complicated and the punishment comes long after the infraction. Within individual communities, teacher absenteeism tends to be chronic and unpunished in three types of situations. *First*, community members may be so sympathetic with the plight of teachers that they acknowledge the legitimacy of teacher absenteeism. For example, if teacher salaries are below subsistence levels, community members may not complain about the time away from class that teachers take to work on their farm. Indeed, they might not be able to imagine a situation in which the teacher would be able to have consistent attendance, for then how would the teacher live? The community tolerates teacher absenteeism from a recognition that the teacher has no choice.

*Second*, community members may have so little idea of what constitutes an effective school, that they do not realize that regular attendance is a reasonable expectation. While this condition is getting more rare, it still occurs in rural areas in which current students are the first generation to attend school. Parents may have such little first-hand experience with schools that they take teacher behaviour for granted. They have no reason to expect anything different; they have no basis for comparison.

*Third*, absenteeism becomes habitual when teachers feel no loyalty to the children or community to which they are assigned. This can happen when teachers lack both legal and emotional ties to the local community in which they work. In most developing countries, teachers are employees of the central government and, in many of those countries, their professional behaviour can be sanctioned only by central government officials. Particularly when teachers are assigned to schools of communities of different ethnic or tribal orientation, they may not feel great allegiance to the community, or vice versa. And, the community may lack any meaningful way of rewarding or sanctioning teacher behaviour. Indifference sets in.

### 3. *Consequences of absenteeism*

The *primary problem* caused by teacher absenteeism is the loss of instructional time for pupils. Since amount of direct instructional time is one of the most important factors in student learning, absenteeism

poses a serious threat to overall student achievement. A *secondary problem* is that teacher absenteeism can lead to higher levels of pupil dropout. If parents perceive that teachers' lack of attendance leads to poor quality instruction, parents may perceive the opportunity cost of schooling to be higher than having the child work at home. Frequent teacher absenteeism undercuts the community's confidence in the school. This loss of confidence may also lead to the growth of private schooling, as parents who value education seek other options for educating their children. This happened, for example, in pre-civil war Liberia during the early 1980s when educational quality dropped sharply. One unfortunate consequence of this option (enrolling children in private school) is that it favours the advantaged. Only the children of those with sufficient money for private tuition receive a solid education. Over time, this increases social and economic disparities in a country.

#### 4. *Designing strategies for lowering teacher absenteeism*

What management strategies and incentives systems can education officials use to reduce teacher absenteeism? A first step is to formulate a clear picture of the influences feeding the problem. The model presented in *Figure 2* summarizes factors associated with teacher absenteeism. Within this model, teacher absenteeism is a function of (a) economic incentives provided by the central government, (b) government policies, (c) teachers' awareness of these incentives and policies, (d) decentralization of authority (over conditions of teaching), (e) school level supervision, (f) local economic incentives, (g) community pressure, and (h) the availability at the community level of appropriate rewards and sanctions. The model helps remind us that (1) the solution to teacher absenteeism has its roots in both the central Ministry and the local community and (2) that central Ministry and local actions need to be coordinated (or at least be pulling in the same direction).

As in the earlier model, the bold headings in *Figure 2* represent the general categories of factors related to teacher absenteeism, while the *italicized* captions underneath each heading describe the types of actions that educators, governments officials, and community members can take to reduce turnover. These actions are described in greater detail in the next section, with suggestions for specific interventions and a discussion of the probable impact and trade-offs associated with each.



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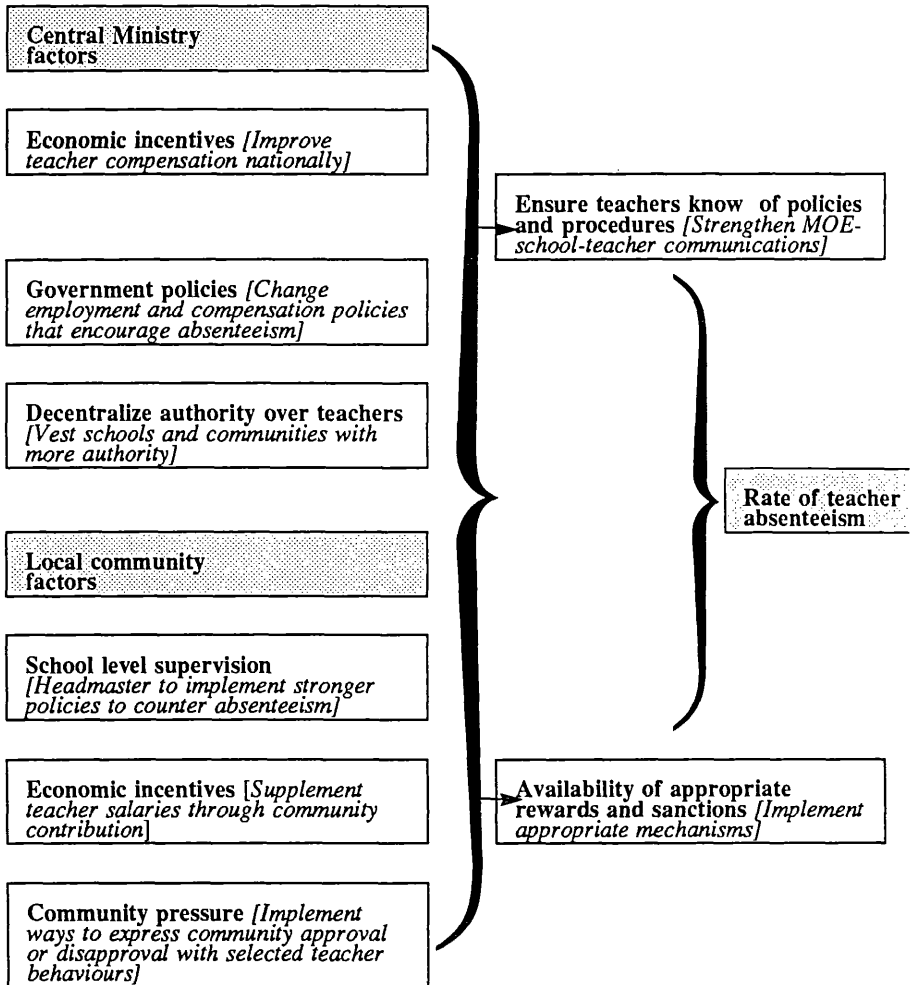


Figure 2. A model of the factors associated with teacher absenteeism

## 5. *Summary of possible strategies to reduce teacher absenteeism*

### 5.1 *Improve economic incentives*

- *Increase teacher compensation*

Teacher absenteeism triggered by *root causes* will only be reduced by resolving the underlying problem – and compensation level is one of the most important root causes. If teaching provides only 20 per cent of a subsistence wage, absenteeism necessitated by the demands of supplemental employment will only be reduced when teachers can earn enough from their teaching to live on.. In these cases, absenteeism is not the problem, rather it is a symptom of a larger problem. Only when the larger problem is fixed can anything be done to address teacher absence. to the extent that absenteeism is motivated by teachers' need To hold supplemental employment, raising teacher salaries can lead to reduced absenteeism. Unfortunately, most governments are more interested in lowering costs than in lowering absenteeism. Faced with severe financial problems, many countries continue to search for non-monetary (or at least lower cost) strategies for improving attendance – not because they do not understand the nature of the problem or the best solution, but because they cannot (or do not want to) commit the resources that would respond to the situation.

On one hand, complaints about low salaries are often widespread across the teaching force. However, the most serious frustration may be among older teachers, those in the system long enough to experience the eroding effect of inflation. More recent recruits to teaching may lament their low pay, but what they earn is more consistent with what they were expecting to earn. It is the more experienced teachers who may feel the need to recapture lost financial ground most acutely, through outside activities that compete with school attendance.

Raising salaries, by itself, is unlikely to do much to thwart absenteeism. Even at higher salary levels, teachers may still seize the opportunity to supplement their income with employment that competes with their teaching duties. To be effective, increases in

salary have to be coupled with clear policies that limit outside work and place clear requirements on teacher attendance. This is one of the points where national policy needs to be carefully co-ordinated with the practices of local school administrators, to ensure that the policies are enforced on a day-to-day basis.

- *Increase allowances and other benefits for teachers with good attendance records*

Raising salaries represents a blanket solution to low salaries. Increasing allowances and benefits provides a more focused means of rewarding teachers for good attendance. However, for focused rewards to work requires that the Ministry have accurate and timely information on teachers attendance practices. Long delays between the pairing of an action and a reward for that action tend to dissipate the impact of the reward.

## 5.2 *Review and revise government policies*

- *Change government policies that lead to absenteeism*

If root causes are resulting in teacher absenteeism, the best solution is to directly address those causes. For example, if teachers are missing class because they have to travel three days to pick up or cash their paychecks each month, absenteeism will only be reduced when a better system for salary payment is implemented. Unfortunately, eliminating root causes is often easier said than done.

Reduce the legitimate need of teachers to leave their teaching post by creating more responsive schemes for distribution and cashing of paychecks, distribution of textbooks, and servicing other needs that previously required a teacher's absence is generally more difficult than it sounds.

The remedies are so obvious that, if the means were available to solve the problem, the problem would probably not have developed to such a state of severity.

The conflicting policies were each implemented to solve a problem. Changing the policies to get teachers paid more efficiently requires that a new solution be found to the original problem. For example, the policy requiring teacher to personally appear to pick up

their paychecks was an attempt to reduce fraud by discouraging the creation of ghost teachers. Moreover, even bad policies tend to have loyal constituencies – individuals or groups who have found ways to benefit from existing regulations and policies. Reviewing and streamlining conflicting policies requires considerable political will.

Where resources to address the problem are not available, governments often find that efforts to treat the symptom rather than the root cause are politically expedient. Focusing on absenteeism rather than low salaries is sometimes an attempt to shift responsibility for educational problems from the government to the teacher.

### 5.3 *Decentralize authority over teachers*

As root causes diminish, *enabling factors* can be addressed. Effective responses to enabling factors, however, almost all rest with the local school and community. The education systems of most developing countries are best described as loosely coupled – characterized by weak communication within and across levels, slow or absent coordination among units, jurisdictional ambiguities, and weak or nonexistent sanctions for violations of policies or procedures. Communities that wait for outside intervention to resolve problems of high absenteeism will wait a long time.

The most effective government strategy is to empower the local school and community to address the problem directly.

At the school and community level, there are essentially only three means of ensuring teacher attendance:

- (i) Teachers must monitor their own behaviour, either out of dedication to their work or fear of sanction.
- (ii) The headmaster (or other instructional supervisor) must monitor teacher attendance and be empowered to sanction teachers who persistently miss class.
- (iii) The community must demand teachers' diligence to their duties.

In effective schools, all three typically operate together.

In many countries, headmasters cannot suspend or fire teachers or dock their pay. They have few, if any, incentives at their disposal with

which to reward teachers for good performance. District and Regional Education Officers may have these powers and prerogatives, but are too far removed from the day-to-day operation of the school to be able to effectively pair rewards and sanctions with specific teacher actions, such as absenteeism.

Community councils provide a means of organizing and communicating local sanctions for teacher absenteeism. These councils can support the headmaster by (a) creating financial (or other types of) incentives for good attendance, (b) aiding the headmaster in judging the legitimacy of the reasons offered for chronic absenteeism, and (c) bringing interpersonal pressure to bear on offending teachers.

Vesting communities with more power over the terms of teachers' employment must be done with *great caution*, lest the solution to high absenteeism create yet another problem with even worse consequences. There are two risks: (a) that communities use their influence to discourage teachers from implementing new pedagogical practices or (b) that communities favour some teachers over others due to political or personal factors having nothing to do with teachers' professional abilities. While local communities are in a better position to resolve high teacher absenteeism, they are also in a position to do great damage to the education system if they abuse their power.

#### 5.4 *Strengthen school-level supervision*

- *Clarify headmasters job descriptions to include enforcement of teacher attendance policies*

In countries in which the conditions of teachers' employment rest primarily with the district or regional education officer, local headmasters may have no formal role in enforcing teacher attendance beyond perhaps noting it in a school report. In most countries where this has been true it is now changing, as educators gain a fuller understanding of the importance of the headmaster's role in instructional supervision. Nonetheless, headmasters are not always clear that they have responsibility (or authority) to monitor teachers' day-to-day behaviour. Some see their position as largely one of managing ministry-school communications, forging community-school relationships, and record keeping. If headmasters are expected to take a

prominent role in encouraging better teacher attendance, they must be given a clear mandate to do so.

- *Create incentives and sanctions that can be applied at the school level*

Such sanctions might include withholding salary (presumably a community supplement), levelling a fine, or withholding some other benefit. It is important that the sanctions be directly and immediately tied to the action; delays in pairing the action with the reward or punishment tend to dissipate its impact. Consequently, a local community council may want to delegate the administration of community incentives and sanctions to the headmaster.

- *Provide headmasters with better training*

Even in settings in which headmasters recognize that absenteeism is a problem, some are not sure what to do about it. Avoiding conflict with the teaching staff is sometimes given a higher priority than ensuring good teacher attendance. To the extent that headmasters do not know how to address the issue, pre- and in-service headmaster training may help. Training needs to address three issues: (i) the headmasters' responsibility and authority to enforce teacher attendance policies; (ii) strategies for working with chronically absent teachers; and (iii) the resources available to headmasters to aid them in addressing absenteeism.

### 5.5 *Institute community-based incentives*

- *Community subsidy of teacher salaries*

When communities subsidize teacher salaries, either through cash or in-kind contributions, they gain some influence over teachers' behaviour, at least to the extent the community is able to use that contribution as a reward or sanction. Several communities in northern (pre-war) Somalia used this strategy successfully. They subsidized teacher salaries, but also made clear what the communities expected from the teachers in return. Teachers developed a new

sense of responsibility to the parents of the children they were teaching.

A community subsidy can be in the form of a cash payment to supplement a teacher's government salary, or in the form of food or other gifts. Its impact on absenteeism depends heavily on (a) making the subsidy contingent, at least in part, on attendance, (b) having an accurate means of tracking of teacher attendance, and (c) being large enough to offset the financial benefits teachers are gaining with the time they are not in school.

Linking the subsidy with attendance poses the biggest problem. Where subsidies are used, they are usually in the service of higher priority goals – such as ensuring that good teachers remain in teaching and stay in the local community. Teacher attendance tends to become the basis for an extra financial incentive only when teacher absenteeism is extreme. Unfortunately, when teacher behaviour gets to that point, it is usually a symptom of a larger problem in the school or community. Tracking attendance is less of a problem, though it requires a systematic record keeping procedure and co-operation of the school leadership. The extent that a financial incentive is *sufficient* (to offset the benefits teachers gain from their out-of-school activity) depend on local economic conditions, e.g. the availability of part-time income producing opportunities. Nonetheless, if the primary cause of teacher absenteeism is low salaries, financial incentives do provide a mechanism that can help reduce the financial need for teachers to skip school. For this mechanism to work, the community must make clear to the teachers the link between subsidy and attendance, and then enforce it.

- *Make use of non-monetary incentives*

Teachers are members of the community, at least for the time they are assigned to the local school, and the acceptance and respect of the community also have some ability to shape teachers' behaviour. The dilemma is that parents and other community members often do not have much schooling, do not understand how schools work, and do not know that they can challenge inappropriate teacher behaviour. An approach used by some countries has been a radio-based information campaign to help communities know what to look for in an effective school. Short messages interspersed in other

programmes offer advice on how parents can support their local schools, suggest indicators of effective schooling, and suggest what communities can do if their schools do not seem to be functioning well. A national radio campaign can help shape community's ideas about appropriate teacher attendance (among other things) in ways that can bring community pressure on teachers.

5.6 *Publicize attendance policies among teachers*

- *Conduct a national information campaign*

Formulating effective policies is not enough. Central government initiatives to stem absenteeism only work if offending teachers know about them. Yet, teachers, particularly those in remote areas, are sometimes not aware of ministry policies and procedures. While most teachers probably realize that absenteeism is not officially condoned, they may not be aware of national policies or programmes that designate sanctions or rewards based on attendance. A national information campaign, perhaps using radio or television, can help reach teachers who may not receive printed circulars. Information campaigns using electronic media offer a second benefit of also reaching community leaders to let them know what constitutes reasonable community expectations regarding teacher behaviour.

- *Strengthen school record keeping systems*

Good information flow needs to go in both directions. While teachers need to know the policies and procedures by which they are to abide, ministry authorities must be able to identify offending teachers in a timely manner. Policies only work if people perceive that they are enforced, fairly and soon after the offense. School records are needed as a basis for documenting the frequency and stated reasons for teacher absences.



5.7 *Create appropriate rewards and sanctions*

- *Implement a set of tiered rewards and sanctions*

Administrators need a set of intermediate and graduated responses to absenteeism they can invoke as needed. For example, if teachers do not heed a warning, they might face a fine. If ignored, they might then face a loss of a community subsidy. Only if the behaviour persists might they then be subject to dismissal.

In considering the afore-mentioned possible strategies for reducing teacher absenteeism, two cautions have to be considered. *First*, none of these strategies will necessarily work alone. They often have to be implemented in combination with other reforms. *Second*, implementing a solution to one problem sometimes creates other, unanticipated problems, some worse than the one being fixed.

For example, we mentioned that while empowering communities to monitor teacher practices is widely advocated, communities often hold very conservative views about education and what constitutes effective educational practices.

*Chapter IV*  
Formulating strategies within  
a particular country

*1. Teacher turnover*

Solutions to teacher attrition do not travel well. What works well in one country will not necessarily have the same effect in another country. Since the causes of high attrition differ from country to country, the solution adapted in any particular country needs to be tailored to its particular context. One implication of this is the need for country-specific research.

There are no magic solutions to reducing teacher turnover. With the possible exception of a massive salary increase, no single intervention is likely to influence teacher retention to any meaningful extent. Rather, an effective strategy to reduce teacher turnover must be based on (a) a realistic assessment of the level of turnover the country should be trying to achieve, (b) an understanding of the options that are reasonable within the particular context of the country, and (c) a careful analysis of how proposed actions to reduce turnover may impact on other goals and activities valued by the ministry. Consequently, formulating an effective programme to reduce turnover involves a set of political decisions made within the political context of a country. Technical information can help inform decision-makers about the probable impact of different interventions on turnover and their cross-impacts on other goals and activities within the ministry, but subsequent actions require a series of judgement calls that combine technical information with political realities. These get tempered by how aggressively the ministry wants to try to reduce turnover, its political strength within the larger government, and the resources at its disposal. Nonetheless, decision-makers can often benefit

from a system that helps them organize and evaluate alternatives. The framework offered in *Figure 3* provides a scheme that decision-makers can use to evaluate possible interventions. The cell into which particular interventions are placed will differ from country to country, depending on the economic and political climate of the country generally and of the education sector specifically, the extent of decentralized decision-making within the education system, and the perceived severity of the problem of turnover.

The use of *Figure 3* involves a three step process. *First*, participants in the process need to develop a set of possible actions to reduce turnover (such as those suggested earlier in this monograph). *Second*, participants evaluate each action in terms of two issues: (a) ease of implementation and (b) probable impact (as described below) and place the action in the appropriate cell of *Figure 3*. *Third*, participants work together to design an implementation plan to undertake their chosen strategies. Within *Figure 3*, each possible strategy is placed in an appropriate cell, as defined below:

*High impact/hard to implement:* These interventions represent the tough political and economic choices. They represent trade-offs between resources and political capital, yet the pay-off of implementing them is anticipated to be high. These interventions have consequences.

*High impact/easy to implement:* If they are easy to do and have a major pay-off in lowering teacher attrition, chances are they are already being implemented. Consequently, they represent the least insightful grouping of interventions. Nonetheless, ideas on this list are of premium value, because if they are not yet being tried, they offer easy payoff.

*Low impact/hard to implement:* Interventions that are hard to implement and, once implemented, have little impact in reducing attrition are a waste of time and money. These can be quickly discarded.

*Low impact/easy to implement:* It is foolish not to implement these interventions. While they are not expected to have much impact, they may contribute to a marginal difference, and they are generally easy to implement.

Figure 3. Framework for evaluating the impact of selected interventions to reduce teacher turnover

	Hard to implement	Easy to implement
High impact		
Low impact		

**An example using this Matrix:**

Teacher turnover in the imaginary country of Nebamto has reached serious proportions. Last year nearly 14 per cent of the teachers left teaching. Education officials recognize that they need to take decisive action, but they are not sure what. To help array and evaluate their options, they agree to the three step process outlined above. As a first step, they generated a list of possible actions, based on the ideas of the participants at the meeting. They tried to think of actions within each category of the model, as a way of making sure they were comprehensive in their thinking (see list in *Figure 4*). (In other countries, the list could be longer, but these were the only possibilities that this group could think of.)

After they drew up their list, each participant at the meeting rated on the list according to how hard the action would be to implement and how much of an impact they thought the action would have if it were implemented. When these ratings were combined, the matrix looked like *Figure 5*.

Then they discussed each item on the list. Needless to say, the discussion within the group was heated. There was considerable disagreement about both the probable impact and the likely problems that would be encountered in implementing several of the suggestions. For example:

*Reducing teacher absenteeism and attrition*

- Everyone agreed that the ministry did not have enough money to raise salaries, allowances, or other benefits. As it was, nearly 90 per cent of the education budget was already tied up in personnel costs, allowing little flexibility for anything else. While controversial, there was some support for allowing teachers more flexibility to accept supplemental employment.
- There was considerable support for bonding teachers requiring 3 years of service in return for their training or else requiring them to reimburse the government for the cost of that training. The problem, others pointed out, was that it was hard enough to recruit teachers now without adding a new obstacle that would discourage applicants.
- Everyone agreed that increasing community subsidies of teacher salaries would have a high impact, and several thought that formulating a ministry policy would be relatively easy, particularly since it would not cost the ministry anything. However, others thought that communities might not be willing (or able) to provide these funds, even if a government policy was in force.
- Since the ministry already accepted virtually any person who wanted to be a teacher, being able to recruit individuals with a stronger commitment to teaching seemed unlikely. It was thought, however, that more attention could be given to encouraging women to go into teaching. Participants agreed to fund a radio information campaign to encourage female applicants.
- The group agreed to provide small amounts of money to local communities to fund teacher support groups, to increase the number of regional professional meetings, and to initiate a new round of in-service training programmes over the school vacation, though, for the most part, these activities were already widely employed. Improving and increasing pre-service training was judged to be too expensive relative to the likely impact on turnover.

Figure 4. List of possible actions to reduce teacher turnover (organized within categories of the model)

Possible actions suggested by group	Where it fits within model
Recruit individuals with higher initial commitment to teaching Recruit more women teachers Recruit individuals with stronger ties to their community	<i>Recruit individuals more likely to remain in teaching</i>
Provide adequate pre-service teacher training Provide in-service training	<i>Strengthen teacher training</i>
Increased government salary for teachers Allow and support alternative income producing opportunities for teachers Special salary increases for longevity Merit pay Increased Allowances Increase benefits (health, retirement, etc.) Subsidized housing Community subsidy of teachers salaries	<i>Improve the financial rewards for those who enter teaching</i>
Job security Increase the status and prestige of teaching Increase community support of teachers Quality of first teaching experience Provide adequate textbooks and instructional materials Provide more effective school level supervision	<i>Improve the quality of teachers' worklife</i>
Encourage implementation of teacher support groups Involve teachers more effectively in curriculum and instructional materials development Provide professional seminars and conferences	<i>Increase professional integration and involvement</i>
Limit alternative employment opportunities within the country by bonding the teacher for 3 years after training Petition government for a larger education share of the national budget.	<i>External influences</i>

Figure 5. Results of participants' efforts to categorize their suggestions

	Hard to implement	Easy to implement
High impact	<p>Increased government salary for teachers</p> <p>Allow and support alternative income producing opportunities for teachers</p> <p>Special salary increases for longevity</p> <p>Merit pay</p> <p>Increased allowances</p> <p>Increase benefits (health, retirement, etc.)</p> <p>Subsidized housing</p>	<p>Community subsidy of teacher salaries</p>
Low impact	<p>Recruit individuals with higher initial commitment to teaching</p> <p>Provide adequate pre-service teacher training</p> <p>Limit alternative employment opportunities within the country by bonding the teacher for 3 years after training</p> <p>Petition government for a larger education share of the national budget.</p>	<p>Recruit more women teachers</p> <p>Recruit individuals with stronger ties to their community</p> <p>Provide in-service training</p> <p>Job security</p> <p>Increase the status and prestige of teaching</p> <p>Increase community support of teachers</p> <p>Quality of first teaching experience</p> <p>Provide adequate text books and instructional materials</p> <p>Provide more effective school level supervision</p> <p>Encourage implementation of teacher support groups</p> <p>Involve teachers more effectively in curriculum and instructional materials development</p> <p>Provide professional seminars and conferences</p>

One of the major insights of the group was the importance of developing a strategy that would incorporate several of these ideas into

a single plan. There were no actions that would provide a single solution. Rather, an effective intervention would need to involve several coordinated actions. The second insight was that many of the actions that were the easiest to do probably would not have much impact. This led the group to review the “*hard to implement/high impact*” suggestions again. The third insight was that, directly or indirectly, virtually all of the suggestions in this category involved providing more money to teachers.

The Nebamto group felt that the best approach would involve a two-part strategy of (a) a renewed emphasis on all the ideas suggested under Low Impact/Easy to Implement in combination with (b) special salary increases for longevity and increase health and retirement benefits. Unfortunately, it will take 3-4 years to see if the strategy has the intended results.

The *Nebamto* example is but an illustration of how the model and evaluative framework can be useful to educational planners and decision-makers concerned with reducing teacher turnover. While the evaluative framework have wide applicability across countries, the particular conclusions reached using this tool will vary from country to country.

## 2. *Teacher absenteeism*

As with the consideration of teacher turnover, ministry and community leaders may benefit from a framework they can use in organizing and evaluating their alternatives. The framework introduced in the discussion of turnover remains a valuable tool, though it may be useful to more clearly separate ministry and community-based strategies when evaluating interventions to lower teacher absenteeism. Adapted in this way, the framework might look like *Figure 6*.

The use of *Figure 6* involves the same three step process discussed earlier.

*First*, participants in the process need to develop a set of possible actions to reduce teacher absenteeism, designating whether the actions would be central Ministry or local initiatives. Their list might look something like the list in *Figure 7*.

*Second*, participants evaluate each action in terms of two issues: (a) *ease of implementation* and (b) *probable impact* and place the action in the appropriate cell of *Figure 6*. These judgments will differ across



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countries, depending on the structure of the education system, the extent of decentralized decision-making, and the perceived severity of the problem of absenteeism.

Figure 6. Framework for evaluating the impact of selected interventions to reduce teacher absenteeism

	Local community		Central ministry	
	Easy to implement	Hard to implement	Easy to implement	Hard to implement
High impact				
Low impact				

Figure 7. List of possible actions to reduce teacher absenteeism

<i>Central ministry actions</i>	
Increase teacher compensation Increase allowances and other benefits for teachers with good attendance records	Improve economic incentives
Change government policies that lead to absenteeism	Review and revise government policies
<i>Local school and community actions</i>	
Give headmasters more authority over terms of teachers' employment Vest local community with more authority over terms of teachers employment	Decentralize authority over teachers
Clarify headmasters job descriptions to include enforcement of teacher attendance policies Create incentives and sanctions that can be applied at the school level Provide headmasters with better training	Strengthen school-level supervision
Community subsidy of teacher salaries Make more effective use of non-monetary incentives	Institute community-based incentives
Conduct a national information campaign Strengthen school record keeping systems	Publicize attendance policies among teachers
Implement a set of tiered rewards and sanctions	Create appropriate rewards and sanctions

*Third*, participants work together to design an implementation plan to undertake their chosen strategies. Since the procedure for evaluating strategies for curtailing absenteeism is essentially the same as the procedure for evaluating strategies to reduce turnover, a detailed example using this framework will not be given. Rather readers are encouraged to review the example provided earlier in the discussion of teacher turnover.

## *Chapter V*

# Summary and conclusions

This monograph examines the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to teacher absenteeism and teacher turnover. In doing so, it re-examines widely held beliefs about the threats they pose to education quality and what education planners and decision-makers can do to minimize their negative impact.

While teacher absenteeism and attrition both contribute to low quality and efficiency of the education system, their impact occurs in different ways. Teacher absenteeism reduces students' direct instructional time; achievement drops as students miss instruction. Turnover results in a loss of experienced teachers who then have to be replaced at considerable expense to the education system. This additional cost, therefore, drains further the scarce available resources which could otherwise have been used to improve the educational quality.

*Among the main points:*

- (i) The problems of absenteeism and turnover are often inadvertently created by the unanticipated cross-impacts of government policies intended to accomplish other ends.
- (ii) Education officials in some countries hold unrealistic expectations about what constitutes an appropriate level of teacher turnover.
- (iii) There is often a tension between actions that would reduce teacher turnover and those that would improve quality of teaching performance. Turnover can be reduced by increasing job satisfaction. Improving teachers' pedagogical practice may require creating a level of discomfort that motivates teachers to either improve their teaching or leave the field.

- (iv) Incentives that can reduce teacher turnover tend to be expensive, more expensive than many governments believe they can afford. The serious financial constraints facing many countries has led many education ministries to search for low-cost or non-monetary incentives that will encourage teachers to remain in teaching. However, the exchange value between monetary and non-monetary incentives is low. It generally takes a lot of non-monetary incentives to match the incentive value of a pay raise.
- (v) There is an irony in educational development. As the economy improves, teacher turnover is likely to increase, as teachers have more employment alternatives. The economic success of a country, in part representing the success of the education system, can operate to undercut the education system.
- (vi) Where absenteeism is due to teachers' own attitudes or lack of motivation, the most effective responses almost all rest with the local school and community. The most effective government strategy, then, is to empower the school and community to address the problem directly at those levels.
- (vii) Centrally imposed incentive systems aimed at shaping teacher behaviour can backfire. Such systems can end up increasing divisiveness and alienation.

In designing national strategies to address teacher absenteeism and turnover, three issues need to be kept in mind. *First*, absenteeism and turnover often reflect reasonable judgements on the part of the teacher. To alter levels of absenteeism and turnover, it is necessary to look to the underlying reasons for those behaviours. *Second*, absenteeism and turnover will only be reduced through a coordinated set of interventions aimed at raising the salary, status, and working conditions of teachers and, in the case of absenteeism, imposing some clear conditions on employment. Single-focus interventions seldom work. This tends to make effective interventions expensive and complicated to implement. *Finally*, efforts to reduce turnover should not be undertaken indiscriminately. Selective turnover can be healthy for an education system.

The monograph proposes a model of the factors associated with teacher turnover and a model of the factors associated with teacher absenteeism. These models serve as a framework for summarizing a lot

of individual action possibilities into more general categories which can then more easily be evaluated. Using the categories suggested by these models, a series of 26 possible interventions to reduce teacher turnover and 13 to reduce teacher absenteeism were identified and their likely impact on turnover and absenteeism was discussed. However, their appropriateness to any particular country have to be evaluated within the particular economic, social and political context of that country. To aid in that consideration, an evaluative framework was proposed in which possible actions are considered in terms of their *difficulty of implementation* and their *likely impact* on turnover or absenteeism. Finally, an example was offered to illustrate the practical use of the model and evaluative framework. Only by going through systematic analysis of the problems posed by teacher absenteeism and turnover can government officials and educators reach informed decisions about the severity of these problems in their countries, formulate reasonable goals for lowering absenteeism and attrition, and develop workable, relevant strategies for reaching these goals.

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## The book

High rates of absenteeism and turnover among teachers are widespread phenomena in many developing countries. Absenteeism and also to a certain extent, attrition can indeed be seen as a waste of scarce resources and a threat to instructional quality and thus hamper efforts to utilize the teaching force available in the most efficient manner. Both are mainly a result of low teacher morale which, in turn, is due largely to lack of financial and other incentives, inappropriate recruitment and promotion policies and weak administrative support for teachers; yet, teacher absenteeism and teacher turnover are quite different matters requiring quite different solutions.

This monograph examines the scope and the causes of these problems as well as their possible solutions and eventually offers a framework that educational managers and planners as well as government decision-makers can use to evaluate possible policy responses within different specific contexts.

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David W. Chapman is Professor of Education at the State University of New York at Albany where he teaches programme evaluation in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice. He is co-author (with Douglas M. Windham) of *The evaluation of educational efficiency: constraints, issues, policies*, co-editor (with Herbert Walberg) of *International issues in educational productivity*. He is also co-author (with Carol Carrier) of *Improving educational quality: a global perspective* and co-editor (with Lars Mählck) of *From data to action: information systems in educational planning*. His research on educational improvement has appeared in many research journals. In addition to his research and work in educational improvement in the USA, he has worked in technical assistance activities in over 18 developing countries.

