

Increasing Instructional Time to Improve Learning Achievement

If Sierra Leone aims to improve learning outcomes it will need to address current low levels of student teacher contact time. The Education Sector Plan (2018-2020) and Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme, propose to ensure schools can deliver sustained learning for all pupils. Current data shows an alarming amount of lost instructional time across the board in secondary schools across the country which is due, in large part, to a combination of both teacher and student absence.

The third Leh Wi Lan learning assessment, conducted in close collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and monthly education management information, collected through School Support Officer (SSO) observation visits, provide valuable data on the time teachers spend on classroom instruction, reasons for absenteeism, use of teaching aids in class, supervision and pedagogical support for teachers. Both data sets suggest that placing significant effort on increasing instructional time is central to ensuring secondary school students in Sierra Leone can complete the curriculum and achieve expected learning levels.

On average, pupils receive 12 hours teaching time per week instead of the prescribed 30 hours

KEY FINDINGS ON INSTRUCTIONAL TIME

Significant teaching time is lost during the school year. Sierra Leone’s secondary school year totals 40 weeks. However, significant time during terms is lost due to breaks for community events, sports events, elections, celebrations and market days. Of concern is the regular delayed release of BECE (Basic Education Certificate Examination) results, often taking up to three months, meaning students moving to senior secondary school lose around a term of education. Further, with West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) now taking place in May and June, the time required for marking means students receive their results after entrance to tertiary institutions has closed.

Teachers spend less than half the school week teaching. Annual learning assessments consistently show that pupils do not get enough time with teachers in the classroom, more so in JSS than SSS. The average teacher taught for slightly less than 12 hours in a standard week. This amounts to approximately two and a half hours of teaching per day or less than half the standard school day, with many classes starting late and finishing early. Regional variation is small, with teachers in the Western province teaching up to 2 hours and 28 minutes per day, while the average teacher in the North had the lowest daily instructional time of 2 hours and 15 minutes. Senior Secondary teachers spend around 30 minutes more time teaching per day than Junior Secondary teachers.

POLICY BRIEF

Teacher absenteeism is a significant factor limiting instructional time.

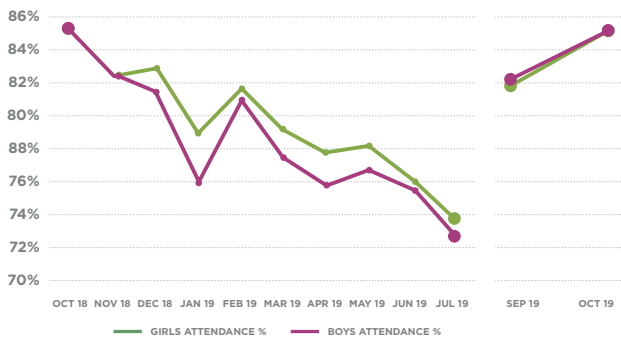
Instructional time is affected by teacher absenteeism from school and the classroom. The reasons reported for teachers' absence from school are illness, social and religious obligations, according to teachers, though principals cite low levels of teacher salary and remuneration as a key factor. Principals say the main reason for their own absence is the need to attend meetings outside school.

Pupil absence is a major cause of lost instructional time.

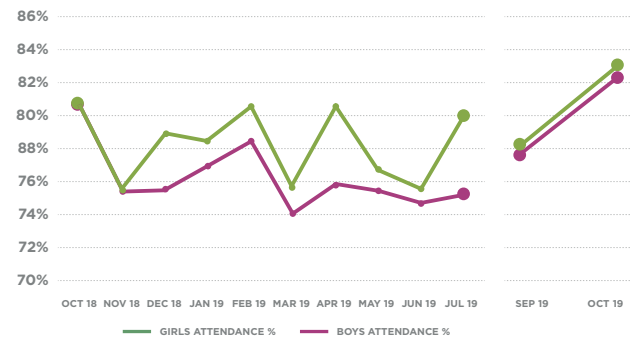
The average disruption is as high as four days over a two-week period. SSS teachers report an average of five days of classes disrupted in the previous two weeks. According to teachers, disruption is most often linked to pupil absenteeism, which in turn leads to the suspension of classes. Girls are considered vulnerable in this regard due to menstruation cycles. Ongoing exams and time off for sports activities, cultural activities and work are also known to be factors for lost instructional time.

PUPIL ATTENDANCE IN CLASSROOMS

Average National JSS Classrom Attendance 2018/19 2019/20



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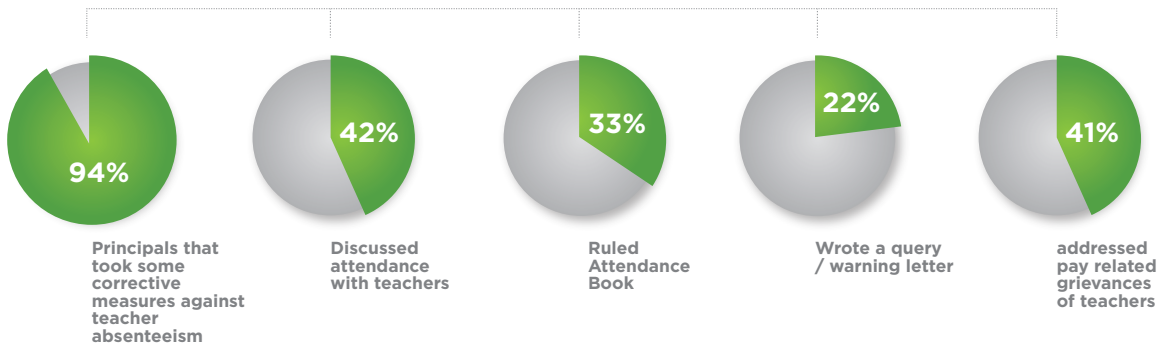
Classroom observations show that one in three classrooms is unattended. Evidence on the extent of teacher absenteeism is provided during school observations, when data collectors tour the school and count the number of classes with pupils but no teachers. SGLA data shows that more than one in three classrooms (36 per cent) report having students but no teacher present during scheduled class hours. This proportion was also found to be significantly higher (42 per cent) in the Southern province compared to other provinces.

Teachers are regularly unable to complete the syllabus. SSO monitoring data suggests that, whilst use of lesson plans is high, most teachers are not on track when following them through the school year. SSO data shows that approximately 20 lessons from term 1 and 10 to 20 lessons from term 2 are not being taught. SSS teachers were found to be lagging farther behind than JSS teachers. This limits the ability of students to understand future content having missed foundational building blocks.

Principals are taking action on teacher attendance. Evidence shows that principals are taking action on teacher attendance. However it would be unreasonable to expect that principals alone can address this issue. More so given the expectation that principals should act more as mentors and instructional leaders. A clear disciplinary system with graduated sanctions which involves both the school management committee and TSC/Ministry officials is required.

POLICY BRIEF

PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS TAKING SOME CORRECTIVE ACTION AGAINST TEACHER ABSENTEEISM



Staff and formal one-on-one meetings are now well established. Principals report that staff and formal meetings regularly address teacher absenteeism, school administration and how teaching time is used. Almost all teachers and principals report having staff meetings in the previous term. Responses suggest staff meetings largely deal with day-to-day school issues and administration. Staff meetings are complemented by formal one-on-one meetings with the principal or head of department.

Lesson observations are carried out regularly. Schools continue to have regular internal and external lesson observations, which improve teaching and how time in class is used. Over 90 per cent of principals and 80 per cent of teachers confirmed that some form of feedback was also provided after the lesson observation, mostly in terms of one-on-one discussion with the concerned teacher. Over two-thirds of teachers in turn confirmed that external visitors had observed their lessons the previous term, with 82 per cent reporting the visitor had been an SSO.

External supervision plays a vital role in teacher development and time on task. SSOs have an essential role to play in supporting teacher improvement and monitoring whether teachers attend class and teach a full working day. Evidence that school leadership and management practices such as staff meetings, lesson observations and supervisory visits now appear to focus more on pedagogical support to teachers provide school-level validation of the formal adoption of SSOs' roles and functions. However, there is concern about arrangements for when Leh Wi Lan closes in March 2021. There are currently no formalised plans regarding the absorption of staff and resources developed by LWL into the education system.

POLICY BRIEF

RECOMMENDATIONS

Short Term

Maximise instruction time: Review extra curricula activities. Rationalise the amount of time allowed for non-learning activities in schools, e.g. sports, to ensure pupils receive the stipulated minimum contact time each day and full school year time allocation (Action: MBSSE).

Address the delays in marking and release of BECE results: Eliminate time loss by ensuring that BECE results are released to schedule, ie. before the start of the school year (Action: MBSSE)

Conduct a study of seasonal factors affecting instructional time among both teachers and pupils, e.g. weather patterns, farming calendar etc. In the light of this review the appropriateness of current school calendar dates. (Action: MBSSE).

Medium Term

Design and implement a disciplinary policy with criterion informed sanctions. The development of this policy should be done in collaboration with key stakeholders such as teacher unions, school management committees and local councils. Work done in the Ministry of Health on using its new payroll system to deduct pay of health workers in the event of unauthorised absence could be instructive (Action: MBSSE/TSC).

Engage with Sierra Leone Teachers Union to support professionalisation of teachers and participate in application and monitoring of teacher professional standards (Action: TSC)

Long Term

Establish realistic levels of instructional time and adapt these to ensure completion of the curricula is achievable. This would have to be based on a comprehensive review and revision of SSS and JSS curricula. (Action: MBSSE)

Reform the teacher performance management system, making regular attendance and instructional time a foundational pillar of career progression (Action: TSC).

Leh Wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five-year (2016-2021) UKaid-funded programme aimed at improving English and Mathematics learning achievement in all secondary schools of Sierra Leone, especially for girls. The programme expects to impact learning conditions for 1.4 million boys and girls, leading to improved secondary exam passes, by making the learning environment safer and more productive.
