

LEARNER ABSENTEEISM IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLING SYSTEM

RESEARCHED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

BY THE

COMMUNITY AGENCY FOR SOCIAL ENQUIRY &
JOINT EDUCATION TRUST



DECEMBER 2007

The Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E)

PO Box 32882

Braamfontein

2017

Telephone: +27 (11) 646 5922

Fax: +27 (11) 646 5919

e-mail: director@case.org.za

Web site address: <http://www.case.org.za>



**Marinda Weideman, Safiyya
Goga, Daniel Lopez, Marium
Mayet, Ian Macun
& Denise Barry (JET)**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	3
List of Tables	6
Acknowledgments	7
Executive Summary	8
1. Introduction.....	8
7. Recommendations	11
1. Introduction and Background to the Study	13
2. Methodology.....	15
2.1 Selection of schools	15
2.2 School visits	15
2.3 In-depth interviews	17
2.4 Literature review	18
2.5 Methodological shortcomings of the study	18
3. Literature Review: Learner Absenteeism	19
3.1 Introduction.....	19
3.2 Defining learner absenteeism and related concepts	19
3.3 Prevalence of absenteeism (South Africa and comparative).....	21
3.3.1. Absenteeism in South Africa	21
3.3.2 Comparative figures and overall rates of absenteeism (authorised and unauthorised).....	23
3.3.3 Unauthorised absence.....	23
3.4 Reasons for absenteeism.....	25
3.4.1 Individual and personal characteristics as contributing factors	25
3.4.2 Socio-economic reasons	26
3.4.3 School-based reasons/contributing factors	30
3.4.4 Other.....	33
3.5 Managing learner absenteeism: International best practice	33
3.5.1 Attendance policies at schools	37
3.6 Monitoring learner absenteeism: International best practice	38
3.6.1 United States and United Kingdom – policies and definitions	39
3.6.2 Information that can be analysed based on policies, systems and type of data collected	44
3.6.3 Electronic systems – how important are they?	50
3.6.3 The importance of NGOs which assist state education departments (in monitoring and tracking absenteeism).....	53

3.7 Monitoring learner absenteeism in South Africa: Policy directions.....	57
3.7.1 Data collection.....	58
3.7.2 Education Management Information Systems (EMIS).....	59
3.7.3 Some qualifications in the implementation of EMIS	60
4. Absenteeism: Prevalence, Understanding and Methods to address absenteeism – Findings from the empirical investigation	65
4.1 Understanding and definition of absenteeism	65
4.2 Absenteeism and drop out: understanding of the problem.....	66
4.3 Prevalence of absenteeism in some South African schools.....	67
4.4 Reasons for absenteeism.....	71
4.5 Measures taken by schools to reduce absenteeism	75
4.6 Recommendations made by Circuit Managers and PED representatives to reduce absenteeism	78
4.7 Recommended role for the national Department of Education.....	79
5. Record Keeping and Systems.....	81
5.1 School registers, methods for recording and levels of absenteeism	81
5.2 Record keeping: Provincial breakdown	82
5.2.1 KwaZulu-Natal.....	82
5.2.2 Eastern Cape.....	83
5.2.3 Northern Cape	83
5.2.4 Limpopo.....	83
5.2.5 Mpumalanga.....	84
5.2.6 North West.....	84
5.2.7 Free State.....	84
5.2.8 Western Cape.....	84
5.2.9 Gauteng.....	85
5.3 Record Keeping: District offices and Schools	85
5.4 Record Keeping: Provincial Offices.....	86
5.4.1 Free State.....	86
5.4.2 Gauteng.....	87
5.4.3 Northern Cape	87
5.4.4 Eastern Cape.....	87
5.4.5 KwaZulu-Natal	88
5.4.6 Limpopo.....	88
5.4.7 Mpumalanga.....	88
5.4.8 North West.....	88
5.4.9 Western Cape.....	89

6. Key Findings.....	90
7. Recommendations	92
8. References	95
Annexure 1: Checklist for School Registers	100
School Register	100
Annexure 2: Discussion Guide for Circuit Managers.....	103
National study on learner absenteeism: Discussion Guide for Circuit Managers.....	103
1. Introduction.....	103
2. Discussion Guide: general and reasons for learner absenteeism	103
3. Discussion Guide: monitoring of learner Absenteeism.....	106
4. Discussion Guide: Strategies to reduce learner Absenteeism	109
Annexure 3: Discussion Guide for Provincial DoE Representative	112
National study on learner absenteeism: Discussion Guide for representatives from Provincial Education Departments	112
1. Introduction.....	112
2. Discussion Guide: General and Reasons for learner absenteeism.....	112
3. Discussion Guide: Monitoring of Learner Absenteeism	114
4. Discussion Guide: Strategies to reduce Learner Absenteeism	116
Annexure 4: Discussion Guide for SGB Representative	119
National study on learner absenteeism: Discussion Guide for SGB Representatives	119
1. Introduction.....	119
2. Discussion Guide: Learner Absenteeism & SGB	119
3. Discussion Guide: Reasons for Learner Absenteeism	120
4. Discussion Guide: measures to curb Learner Absenteeism.....	122
Annexure 5: Discussion Guide for School Principals	124
Background information	124
1. Discussion Guide: policies and monitoring.....	124
2. Discussion Guide: Relationship with district/ province	126
3. Discussion Guide: reasons for learner Absenteeism	128
4. Discussion Guide: measures to curb learner Absenteeism.....	130
Annexure 6: School record keeping and sources of documents	132
Annexure 7: General record keeping for absenteeism.....	134

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Schools visited by province, date and area.....12

Table 2: Definitions of drop-outs provided by school principals.....62

Table 3: Estimates of absenteeism rates.....63

Table 4: Daily rates of absenteeism.....64

Table 5: Policies and procedures to address systemic absenteeism72

Table 6: School record keeping 78

Table 7: Does the school receive the relevant documents from the Department of Education?
.....78

Table 8: General record keeping for absenteeism.....78

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of persons played an important role in this research project. Firstly, Dr Hersheela Narsee and Moses Simelane of the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate in the national Department of Education took a strong interest in the project from its inception. Their input at the design stage, facilitating contact with the Provincial Education Departments (PED) and comments on draft reports, were invaluable. Secondly, the designated contact persons in each of the Provincial Departments assisted in selecting schools, facilitating the group interviews with representatives of the Districts and arranging interviews with relevant persons in the Provincial Head Offices. Thirdly, school principals and representatives of school governing bodies gave generously of their time and made information available to the research team. Our thanks go to all the above for their assistance and participation in the study.

Finally, Carla Pereira of JET Education Services gave useful comment and input on the final version of the report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction

This study was commissioned by the Department of Education to investigate learner absenteeism in South African schools. . It was initiated in late 2006 and conducted during January to July 2007. The purpose of the study was to investigate the incidence of learner absenteeism in the country, the reasons why learners absent themselves from schools and examine the systems that exist to monitor and reduce learner absenteeism.

The investigation was based on a limited study of thirty schools throughout the nine provinces of South Africa complemented by interviews with officials from district and provincial offices of the Department in each province. Structured questionnaires were used as a basis for interviews with school principals, representatives of School Governing Bodies, district officials and representatives of the Provincial Department of Education head offices. To complement the primary data collection, a detailed literature review was undertaken to explore various aspects of learner absenteeism in available international and local literature. More importantly, the local literature review aimed at examining large scale studies on the incidence of learner absenteeism in South Africa.

2. Definitional issues

The international literature dealing with absenteeism is substantial and varied. An important distinction in the literature is that between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism with the former referring to absenteeism that may be authorised by the school and/or parents. Unauthorised absenteeism refers to absence from school for reasons that are generally not known to the school or parents or both or to particular behaviour by learners – such as truancy. A further distinction is that between partial or full absenteeism. Partial refers to absence for a part of the school day and full to absence for the entire day. Based on the literature and the primary research, the study adopted a simple **definition of absenteeism as a situation where a learner is not at school for an entire day**. This definition does not distinguish between different categories of absenteeism, although a recommendation is made that information be captured for authorised and unauthorised absenteeism.

3. Extent of learner absenteeism

Studies that have been conducted in South Africa that contain information on learner absenteeism, report a prevalence of between 5 and 15 percent. This does not include partial absenteeism, which would cover absence from certain lessons only or late coming due to

problems with transport – both of which are reported to be fairly common, albeit in a limited number of studies.

The extent of learner absenteeism in South Africa is roughly comparable to the limited information sourced for other countries that report absenteeism rates of between 6 and 8 percent. There is, however, considerable variation in absenteeism rates, depending on the type of country that one compares with, the definitions that are used and the methodologies that underlie the data collection. There is no international standard for the recording and monitoring of learner absenteeism.

In the thirty schools visited as part of the study, it was found that the absenteeism rate was approximately 4 to 5 percent. This absenteeism rate is based on estimates by school principals and the collection of information for two dates in February 2007. Attempts to gather information on absenteeism for 2006 from schools was not successful. This finding for learner absenteeism is clearly at the lower end of the range compared to other South African studies and this may have to do with the nature of the schools that were selected for the study.

4. Reasons for learner absenteeism

The reasons for learner absenteeism reported in the literature are varied, but generally fall in three broad categories. Firstly, there are reasons for absenteeism associated with personal factors, such as illness, age, gender and learning difficulties. Secondly, absenteeism may be caused by socio-economic factors relating to food insecurity, problems with transport to school, the impact of HIV/AIDS on children and families, teenage pregnancy and situations of child labour. Finally, there are a range of reasons relating to schools that may contribute to learner absenteeism. Inability to pay school fees may lead to absenteeism, poor learner-educator relationships contribute to absenteeism, as do poor school facilities.

The reasons for absenteeism reported by school principals, district officials and representatives of provincial departments in South Africa were varied, although the five most commonly cited reasons were: poverty, transport, illness, lack of parental involvement and food insecurity. These reasons point to the predominance of socio-economic factors in explaining absenteeism in South Africa. Most schools do have measures in place to curb absenteeism and these include; sporting and extra-curricular activity, improved communication between parents and the schools, systems of merits/demerits and honouring good attendance. The importance of the Primary School Nutrition Programme was also noted as an initiative that curbs absenteeism.

5. Systems for monitoring learner absenteeism

The study investigated the systems of record keeping at school level and how these were guided and supported by the districts and Provincial Education Departments (PEDs). The findings in this regard were that almost all the schools do keep daily attendance registers that record attendance and absenteeism by class and grade. The information is disaggregated by gender. Some schools also maintain a summary register and develop quarterly reports that are, in most cases, submitted to the district offices of the PED. A few schools also keep period registers, but these are a small minority.

Many of the schools and PED representatives reported that they do have a policy that guides the recording and monitoring of absenteeism, but in most cases, this was equated with the maintenance of a register and the submission of information to the district offices. The study did not find evidence of formal provincial policies on learner absenteeism. It was clear that the district offices play a limited role in monitoring learner attendance and absenteeism. While reports are forwarded to them, officials from the district office will only intervene and visit schools where problems are evident and of an exceptional nature. Generally, the reports from schools are forwarded to the PED with little or no analysis and/or aggregation of information being undertaken at the district level.

The situation across PED's is uneven when it comes to monitoring learner absenteeism. While most provincial departments receive reports from the district offices, only 4 reported that they analyse and report on this information. The frequency of reporting also varies between annual and quarterly. There is no systematic attempt to analyse, report and use the information on learner absenteeism to follow-up with schools where there are problems. In the Western Cape, there is an initiative called the Learner Support Officers Project, which has reportedly been very successful in reducing absenteeism.

6. International good practice in managing and monitoring absenteeism

The literature review sought information on how learner absenteeism is managed and monitored in other countries and what good practice is to be found. In the area of management, a range of good practice is reported that focuses on learners, such as having individual instruction for learners who experience difficulties at school, home visits and counselling for learners with special needs. Teacher centered approaches are also evident in a number of countries where there is emphasis on the leadership role of principals, involvement of teachers in curriculum planning, effective teacher supervision and allocation

of responsibilities for monitoring absenteeism to individual teachers. Finally, incentives and rewards can also be found to play an important role in maintaining good attendance by learners and reducing absenteeism.

The monitoring of absenteeism is afforded varying levels of priority in different countries. In more developed countries, with well functioning education systems, considerable resources are invested in systems to record, track, monitor and manage learner absenteeism. Countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) have attendance policies in place as a starting point for their monitoring system. These policies would, inter alia, distinguish between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism as a way to guide monitoring practice. The use of attendance registers forms a cornerstone in monitoring learner attendance and absenteeism and there are usually detailed guidelines on the frequency of their use, who is responsible for completing the registers and how they should be completed. In some countries, such as the UK, electronic systems are in use to capture information in efficient and reliable ways.

7. Recommendations

The study was exploratory in nature and did not aim to gather information in a representative and systematic way. The findings should be viewed in this context although certain findings, for instance, that relating to the prevalence of absenteeism and the main reasons for absenteeism, correspond well to findings from other studies. Any attempt to reduce absenteeism should take account of the fact that it is in many cases a symptom of broader socio-economic problems. The recommendations arising from the study are as follows:

4.1. Approaches to managing absenteeism should be devised in a holistic way, to take account of the broader problems that contribute to absenteeism, but should also be specific to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the schools and surrounding communities where absenteeism is a problem.

4.2. Attendance policies should be considered as a first step to improved management and monitoring of learner absenteeism. Such a policy needs to encompass expectations of learners, parents as well as educators. It should also set clear guidelines for monitoring and reporting and address the use of information to reduce absenteeism.

4.3. Monitoring needs to be clarified and reinforced at all levels of the education system.

4.4. Efforts should be made to increase the involvement of parents and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in promoting attendance and monitoring and reducing absenteeism.

4.5. Expanding access to free basic education to more learners will contribute to reducing levels of absenteeism, as will the extension of feeding schemes/nutrition programmes and the provision of transport assistance to schools.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In terms of section three (1) of the South African Schools Act, parents and guardians are compelled to ensure that learners for whom they are responsible “attend school from the first school day of the year in which such a learner reaches the age of seven years until the last school day of the year in which such a learner reaches the age of fifteen years or the ninth grade, whichever comes first”.

Furthermore, in terms of section five of the same Act the Head of Department is compelled to employ several measures if learners fail to attend school. These include an investigation into the circumstances of the learner’s absence from school, the adoption of appropriate measures to remedy the situation and the issuing of written notices to the parent/s of the learner where necessary.

It is also generally accepted that regular attendance at school and the consequent interaction with peers and teachers is an important determinant of learner achievement¹. It is often argued that the effects of absenteeism are profoundly negative both for the individuals involved and the communities in which they live. It is argued² that learners who are frequently absent are at risk of not achieving their educational, social or psychological potential and their future career prospects are limited. These learners may³:

- Become socially isolated
- Place themselves at risk of harm during periods of absence
- Be more likely to be involved in socially unacceptable and/or illegal activities
- Have gaps in their knowledge and understanding of basic concepts
- Feel insecure in the school environment
- Be more likely to leave school early
- Be over-represented in the juvenile justice system
- Be the victims of bullying and harassment

¹ See literature review for more information.

² Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

³ Malcolm H et al 2003, Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

Nevertheless, relatively little is known about the level of absenteeism in South African schools, and the systems used by schools, districts and provincial head offices to monitor and reduce learner absenteeism from schools.

Partly in response to this lack of available knowledge, the Department of Education commissioned the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E), together with the Joint Education Trust Education Services (JET Education Services), to conduct a study of learner absenteeism in the South African schooling system. The aims of the study were:

- to provide information on the incidence of learner absenteeism in the country,
- to investigate the reasons why learners absent themselves from schools,
- to provide an analysis of the systems that exist to monitor and reduce learner absenteeism.

In fact, one of the main focus areas for the study is the management and monitoring of learner absenteeism at different levels of the schooling system. School record-keeping, as well as data collection and analysis at district and provincial levels were therefore a key data collection focus of the study.

In brief, this report presents an exploratory insight into the extent and reasons for learner absenteeism in South African schools, the monitoring and management of the problem particularly with regard to information gathering, and recommendations for improved monitoring derived from our research as well as from international best practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodologies were used to conduct this research project in the nine provinces of South Africa. This included a literature review, an examination of learner attendance records, as well as, interviews with school principals, representatives of School Governing Bodies/Boards, and District and Head Office officials of the nine Provincial Departments of Education.

2.1 Selection of schools

Individual contact persons in the Provincial Departments of Education were requested by the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate of the National Department of Education to select schools on the following basis:

- One/Two primary and one/two secondary schools per province (minimum three schools per province);
- The schools selected were to be within a 200km radius of the Provincial Head Office;
- In the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Western Cape, North West, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo province, the selected schools were to be two township schools, one suburban school and one rural school;
- In Gauteng, two township schools, one school in an informal settlement and one suburban school were to be selected, and;
- In Free State and Mpumalanga, two township schools, one farm school and one suburban school were to be selected.

Names and contact details of the schools were provided to C A S E by individual contact persons in the Provincial Departments of Education (PED) and a total of thirty schools were visited in the nine provinces during April and May 2007. The school details are provided in Table 1 below.

2.2 School visits

During the visits at the identified schools interviews were conducted with the principals and a representative of the parent component of the School Governing Body (SGB). The school registers were also examined to establish methods of monitoring and recording learner attendance and absenteeism and when readily available, information on absenteeism for 2006 was collected. In addition, the absenteeism figures for two days, the 6th and 9th of February 2007, were recorded at each school. These figures are used to validate absentee

rates provided by principals of the researched schools. We selected two days (Tuesday and a Friday) to ensure that we did not capture unrepresentative information (i.e. we anticipated that absence would be more likely on a Friday than a Tuesday). Although we employed a structured interview questionnaire, interviewers were encouraged to engage respondents in more extensive discussions on the subject matter. These “additional” discussions have been useful in creating a richer context for the report and in interpreting findings during analysis.

Table 1: Schools visited by province, date and area

	School	Province	Date visited	Area	Contact number
1	King Shaka High School	KwaZulu-Natal	23 March 2007	Umlazi Township	031 907 6430
2	Pinetown Boys High	KwaZulu-Natal	23 March 2007	Urban	031 701 5046
3	Pella Primary School	KwaZulu-Natal	22 March 2007	Farm School situated near Wartburg	033 503 1918
4	Siyamu Junior Primary School	KwaZulu-Natal	22 March 2007	Edendale Township	033 399 5304
5	Hlokoma High School	Eastern Cape	3 rd May 2007	Mdantsane Township	043 760 1800
6	Southernwood Primary	Eastern Cape	2 nd May 2007	Urban, East London	043 722 5248
7	Phillip Mtywaku Secondary School	Eastern Cape	3 rd May 2007	King Williams Town, Peelton Township	040 636 0048
8	Fanti Gaqa Senior Primary School	Eastern Cape	3 rd May 2007	Mdantsane Township	043 762 1735
9	Flamingo Primary School	Northern Cape	22 March 2007	Urban, Homestead, Kimberley	053 871 3583
10	Radirile Intermediate School	Northern Cape	22 March 2007	Galeshewe Township, Kimberley	053 874 1240
11	Hoer Tegniese Skool (Secondary school)	Northern Cape	23 March 2007	Urban, Kimberley	053 861 3917
12	Bokomose Secondary School	Limpopo	14 March 2007	Seshogo Township	015 223 6888
13	Pietersburg Primary School	Limpopo	14 March 2007	Urban	015 291 3371
14	O.R. Mabotja Secondary School	Limpopo	15 March 2007	Mokgofe Village, Rural School	015 233 5195
15	Lekazi Primary School	Mpumalanga	24 April 2007	Kanyamazane Township	013 794 0281
16	Lekazi	Mpumalanga	24 April 2007	Khanyamazane	013 794 0207

	Secondary School			Township	
17	Malelane Primary School	Mpumalanga	23 April 2007	Urban, Malelane	013 790 1309
18	Lwaleng Primary School	Mpumalanga	23 April 2007	Farm School, White River	082 633 8444
19	Gaetsho Secondary School	North West	15 March 2007	Boikutso Township	018 634 8206
20	Redibone Middle School	North West	14 March 2007	Mmabatho, Urban	018 384 5177
21	Boiteko Primary School	North West	14 March 2007	Itsoseng Township	018 33 824 24
22	Moroko High School	Free State	15 March 2007	Rural, Thaba Nchu	051 873 2245
23	Kgauho Secondary School	Free State	15 March 2007	Botshabelo Township	051 532 1413
24	Ditlatse Primary School	Free State	15 March 2007	Farm School (Primary), near Bloemfontein	051 445 2009
25	Mannenber Primary	Western Cape	26 March 2007	Manenberg, Urban	021 637 1762
26	Guguletu Comprehensive (a.k.a. Intshukumo Secondary)	Western Cape	29 April 2007	Intshukumo Township	021 637 1803
27	Milnerton High School	Western Cape	26 March 2007	Urban, Milnerton	021 551 2217
28	Greenside High	Gauteng	6 March 2007	Urban, Greenside, Johannesburg	(011) 6460113
29	Tsakane Secondary School	Gauteng	20 March 2007	Peri-urban, township school	(011) 7388537
30	Empumalanga Primary School	Gauteng	15 May 2007	Peri-urban, township school	011 939 4115

2.3 In-depth interviews

At the provincial level, interviews were conducted with officials of the Provincial Departments of Education in each of the provinces. Names of contact persons were supplied by the National Department and these officials assisted the researchers in identifying the appropriate persons to be interviewed. In addition, group interviews were conducted with circuit or district managers, consisting of between 2 and 5 persons per group. Again, a structured interview questionnaire was used and, in some cases, interviewers engaged respondents in more extensive discussions on the topics contained in the questionnaire.

2.4 Literature review

In addition to the interviews, a literature review was carried out to arrive at a definition of absenteeism, to review existing studies that address the phenomenon in South Africa and to review evidence of systems used to monitor and reduce learner absenteeism internationally. The literature review is presented in the next chapter.

2.5 Methodological shortcomings of the study

There are two shortcomings in the methodology used in this research project, both of which point to the fact that the sample may not be representative. Firstly, budget constraints dictated the small sample of 30 schools. A bigger sample may have yielded different findings. Secondly, the selection of schools may have been biased towards those that are well functioning and better managed. Given that individual contact persons in the Provincial Departments were requested by the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate of the National Department of Education to select schools for the study, there is no guarantee that the schools that were visited are representative of the majority of schools in the provinces. What is encouraging, however, is that there is some external validity for the findings, as other studies conducted in South Africa generally support the findings and arguments contained in this report.⁴

⁴ See literature review as well as the “Findings” section of this report.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

3.1 Introduction

Relatively little is known about learner absenteeism in South African schools – the level of absenteeism, the systems used by schools, districts and provincial head offices to monitor learner absenteeism and the steps taken to reduce absenteeism. The purposes of the literature review are, therefore, to:

- Examine the understanding and conceptions of learner absenteeism in the general literature on the topic;
- To review evidence of systems used to monitor and reduce learner absenteeism nationally and internationally;
- To identify and summarise large-scale research on the phenomenon of learner absenteeism in South Africa, with a view, in particular, to identify the extent of learner absenteeism in South Africa.

The literature review attempts to gain relevant insights from national and international good practice with regard to monitoring systems and steps taken to reduce absenteeism.

3.2 Defining learner absenteeism and related concepts

Although there is a legislative context in terms of the South African Schools Act for learner absenteeism⁵, the Act does not define the term “learner absenteeism”. In fact, the local and international material located for this literature review highlight the fact that there are a plethora of definitions (and terminology) relating to learner absenteeism⁶. The concept learner absenteeism is often used as a collective concept that includes various “types” of absenteeism. Much of the literature and reports on studies conducted on absenteeism, tend to focus on a particular “type” of absenteeism.

Authors⁷ generally distinguish between unauthorised absence from school (also labelled truancy⁸) and authorised absence from school. Authorised absence from schools can be “authorised” by parents, schools or both.

⁵ See section Introduction and Background to the study for more information on the South African Schools Act and how it pertains to learner absenteeism

⁶ See also Gabb 1994

⁷ Morris M & Rutt S 2004, Edward S & Malcolm H 2002, Stoll P 1990, Whitney B 1994

Furthermore, authorised absence from school can be defined as legitimate or illegitimate⁹ (also sometimes labelled school phobia¹⁰). Legitimate absence will be authorised by the parents and the school and refers to factors such as illness of a learner. Illegitimate, but parentally authorised absences include; child labour, excessive household responsibilities, or perceptions within communities or families that school attendance and/or education is less important than the tasks assigned to the child. School phobia refers to the phenomenon where a learner is unwilling to attend school, and stays at home with the knowledge of his or her parents. Factors contributing to school phobia include fear of failure and concerns about the health and welfare of parents.

Finally, absence can be partial¹¹ (absent for part of the day) or full (absent for an entire day). Unauthorised or illegitimately authorised partial absenteeism is also referred to in the literature as post-registration truancy.¹²

The wide range of interpretations and variety of definitions for learner absenteeism naturally has complex consequences for research design, including the design of instruments and choice of method and for data analysis (particularly comparative analysis). It is also important to note that terms like absenteeism and truancy have been given different meanings by different writers and conclusions reached in one study cannot automatically be regarded as being supported or refuted by conclusions reached in other studies

Based on the literature review and the definitions employed in the surveyed schools, this study opts for the following (simple) definition of learner absenteeism: **a learner is considered absent when the learner is not at school for an entire day**. This is also the definition currently employed by the majority of schools surveyed for this study when recording attendance and absenteeism. Nevertheless, it would be useful to distinguish in policy and data capturing and recording methodologies between partial absenteeism (absent for part of the day) and full absenteeism (absent for the entire day). Absenteeism (whether partial or full) can be authorised (by parents or schools) or unauthorised. Further, authorised

⁸ Moseki M. (2004) "The Nature of Truancy and the Lifeworld of Truants in Secondary Schools", University of South Africa

⁹ Whitney B 1994

¹⁰ Moseki M. (2004) "The Nature of Truancy and the Lifeworld of Truants in Secondary Schools", University of South Africa

¹¹ Atkinson M, Halsey K et al 2000

¹² Moseki M. 2004, Atkinson M & Kinder K 2000

absenteeism (by parents) can be legitimate (e.g. due to learner illness) or illegitimate (e.g. parent does not consider education important or engages the learner in child labour).

3.3 Prevalence of absenteeism (South Africa and comparative)

3.3.1. Absenteeism in South Africa

Absenteeism rates in South Africa have been found to vary between approximately 5 and 15 percent. While a number of studies have been conducted that include information on learner absenteeism, some of them by government and others being independent studies, the focus of these studies vary considerably and some are local or provincial while others are national in scope. It is, therefore, difficult to draw firm conclusions. The following are studies that are concerned with learner attendance or which comment on findings relating to absenteeism.

A baseline attendance study conducted by the Provincial Education Department in the Eastern Cape found that average learner attendance is 95 percent (absentee rate 5%)¹³ and the pilot study reported on here reveals an absentee rate of about 5%. Similarly, a pilot study conducted by Professor Servaas van Der Berg of 131 classes in 11 schools in Limpopo revealed a lower absenteeism rate of 2.2 percent.¹⁴

Large-scale surveys find higher rates of absenteeism, although these studies are based on different methods and sampling techniques and do not calculate rates on the basis of the number of learners enrolled at a school, but on the basis of a sample of respondents. The 2006 Labour Force Survey¹⁵ contained a special module on child labour which asked about school attendance of children aged 10 to 17 years of age. This survey, of 30 000 households, found that overall, 96 percent of children aged 10 to 17 years were attending school – or were enrolled at school. Of those reported to be attending school, 8% had been absent from school for more than five days over the past 12 months.

¹³ Eastern Cape Department of Education. 2003/4. "Imbewu II Comprehensive Evaluation: Attendance Baseline Study 2003/4 (Abridged Report)"

¹⁴ E-mail from Professor van der Berg dated 13 July 2007. Although the author notes that there is probably some under-recording, as recording in the register often takes place with a lag.

¹⁵ Budlender D. 2007. Child labour and other work-related activities in South Africa. From: the Labour Force Survey, March 2006. Department of Labour/Stats SA/ILO (draft).

The Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR)¹⁶ conducted an analysis of the large-scale Time Use Survey carried out by Statistics South Africa in 2000. The Time Use Survey included information on absenteeism from school and was based on recall diaries from approximately 14,000 individuals. The findings, as analysed by the CSSR, suggest that absenteeism rates in South Africa are higher than those suggested by the studies listed above. The study found that in February and October (months in which there are no vacations) the attendance rate at South African schools was 85 percent (i.e. a 15 percent absenteeism rate). It should be borne in mind that the time use survey asked a number of questions that were intended to establish the labour market status of respondents. The category used in the study as the schooling population were those who indicated that they were not looking for work because they were “in education and training”¹⁷. This category, as noted by the author, may not capture the real schooling population very well.

A related, but different finding of the CSSR study is that many South African learners arrive late for school and 20 percent had not started school by 8h30.¹⁸ Late coming would clearly affect absenteeism depending on the definition used and whether it were to make allowance for partial absenteeism.

A large scale research initiative in which the South African Ministry of Education has been involved is the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). During 2000, the SACMEQ initiative undertook a study in 169 sample schools in South Africa with a focus on grade 6 learners. A specific question included in the questionnaire administered to learners was how many days they were absent in the previous month and the reasons for these absences. The mean number of days absent was found to be 1.6 days nationally.¹⁹ The provinces with the highest absenteeism rates were found to be Limpopo, KwaZulu Natal and Mpumalanga.²⁰

It should be noted that the measurement of days absent in a one month period distinguishes the SACMEQ study from other studies that tend to measure number of learners absent as a proportion of total enrolled learners.

¹⁶ Wittenberg M. May 2005, “The School Day in South Africa”, Working Paper No. 113, Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 13.

¹⁹ Moloi, M & Strauss, J. 2005. The SACMEQ II Project in South Africa: A Study of the conditions of schooling and the quality of education. SACMEQ Educational Policy Research Series, chapter 3, pg. 78.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Another report that contains information on the prevalence of learner absenteeism is the National Treasury's 2006 Provincial Budgets and Expenditure Review Report. It also measured absenteeism through learner days lost, which the report placed at 7,344,529 for the primary phase of education, although results are missing for Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Northern Cape. Absenteeism was greatest in the Western Cape, which lost 150,490 days due to learner absenteeism. The number of learner days lost due to absenteeism was lower for secondary schools, at 4,958,020, although, as with the figures for the primary phases of education, a number of provinces were not reported on.²¹ The problem with using absentee days is that it is based on learner enrolment, which is lower in secondary schools than in primary schools. The figures in this report could be interpreted to mean that more primary school learners than secondary school learners are absent, which is not the case.

3.3.2 Comparative figures and overall rates of absenteeism (authorised and unauthorised)

Studies measuring attendance data from Tasmanian schools showed that on average about 8% of students are absent from school each day.²² Statistics released by the Department for Education and Skills in London in 2003, estimated the absentee rate for all schools in England at 6.83 percent.²³

Available information suggests that absenteeism rates in Africa are much higher. A study conducted to determine the quality of education in Namibia, for example, revealed that only 50% of grade 6 learners were in schools where learner absenteeism was described as a "huge problem".²⁴

3.3.3 Unauthorised absence

International studies suggest that unauthorised absence or truancy constitute only a relatively small percentage of overall learner absenteeism. Statistics released by the Department of Education and Skills in London on absenteeism in all schools in London reported that only 0.70 percent of absenteeism is unauthorised.²⁵ In addition, Research in

²¹ National Treasury "Provincial Budgets and Expenditure Review: 2002/3-2008/9", Republic of South Africa

²² Tasmania Government Publications. 2002. "At school, on time, ready for work",
www.premier.tas.gov.publications

²³ Department of Education and Skills 2003

²⁴ Voigts F. "The Quality of Education: Some Policy Suggestions Based on a Survey of Schools" SACMEQ Policy Research: Report No. 2 (Kenneth Ross Ed)

²⁵ Department of Education and Skills 2003

Education, at the University of Glasgow, noted that the 1999 Audit Commission in the United Kingdom reported that 40,000 of 400,000 (10%) pupils absent from school each day are truanting, or being kept off school by their parents without permission.²⁶ This number is comparable to the figure of 50 000 truants in England mentioned by Norman (2001:49) in Moseki (2004). A study conducted in 2003, however, found that 27 percent of primary school children in the United Kingdom said that they had truanted without collusion from their parents.²⁷ The estimate from the 2002 Tasmanian school attendance study²⁸ cited previously is that 2 to 3 percent of absences were unauthorised. In a 1994 literature review, Gabb²⁹ argues that most researchers settle on an unauthorised absenteeism rate of 15 percent.

However, a number of studies show much higher levels of unauthorised absences. In one study, 70% of the sampled students in a London School admitted truanting during a three-year period (Stoll, 1990:22 in Moseki, 2004). Further, 40% to 60% of learners of compulsory school age in Victoria, Australia report engaging in truancy.³⁰

Research conducted in South Africa shows similar trends³¹ (i.e. the majority of recorded absences are authorised, but partial absences, which are often not recorded, may take place more frequently). In a study focussing on grade 10 learners in three schools in the Frances Baard region of the Northern Cape, it was found that four or more learners per class missed certain lessons during the week – mathematics and biology lessons were most likely to be missed.³²

Discrepancies in statistics pertaining to unauthorised absenteeism can probably be explained in terms of the recording mechanism. This issue will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of the report, but briefly stated, estimates based on formal attendance

²⁶ Research in Education: University of Glasgow SCRE. (2002). "The Causes and Effects of Truancy" Newsletter No. 71

²⁷ Malcolm H et al. 2003

²⁸ Tasmania Government Publications. 2002. "At school, on time, ready for work", www.premier.tas.gov.publications

²⁹ Gabb 1994

³⁰ Moseki, M (2004) "The Nature of Truancy and the Lifeworld of Truants in Secondary Schools", University of South Africa (p16)

³¹ For example, similar to the unauthorised absence rates in the EiC Areas in the United Kingdom as reported by Morries M & Rutt S 2004

³² Moseki, M. 2004. "The Nature of Truancy and the Lifeworld of Truants in Secondary Schools", University of South Africa

registers³³ completed in the early morning will tend to under report unauthorised absences, particularly partial unauthorised absences. On the other hand, studies that confidentially interview learners about their behaviour will most likely (and this is the case in the studies cited above) report much higher unauthorised absenteeism rates as learners would be willing to admit such behaviour in the absence of potential negative consequences.

Discrepancies in cited figures of absenteeism can also be explained by the fact that terms like absenteeism and truancy have been given different meanings by different writers and conclusions reached in one study cannot automatically be regarded as being supported or refuted by conclusions reached in other studies.³⁴

3.4 Reasons for absenteeism

3.4.1 Individual and personal characteristics as contributing factors

Illness: Illness is one of the primary reasons for recorded absenteeism rates and is certainly the primary reason for legitimately authorised absenteeism in South Africa and elsewhere.³⁵

Age: There is some evidence³⁶ to suggest that age is inversely correlated with absenteeism rates. International research³⁷ shows that the number of unauthorised absences in secondary schools in Victoria, Australia increases steadily with age and that the majority of learners that engage in unauthorised absenteeism are found in secondary schools.

The Labour Force Survey data from March 2006, shows that attendance rates decrease with age, particularly for the 16 to 17 year age group.³⁸ It is worth noting, however, that the National Treasury's 2006 Provincial Budgets and Expenditure Review Report, suggests a contradictory estimate of the correlation between learner absenteeism and age, due to the focus on learner days for primary schools, rather than primary and secondary.

³³ See also Gabb 1994

³⁴ It is interesting to note that there are even discrepancies in the targets set for absenteeism. Railsback 2004 reports that under federal law each state can set its own target rate for attendance. She reports that four states in the Pacific Northwest – Alaska, Montana, Oregon and Washington – are using attendance as an indicator. Yet, Oregon's target is 92 percent attendance. Alaska sets its target at 85 percent attendance. Washington's target is an unauthorised absence rate of one percent and Montana has not yet set a target rate.

³⁵ Oregon Department of Human Services 2002, HSRC Emerging Voices 2005, Budlender D 2006

³⁶ Malcolm H et al 2003

³⁷ Moseki 2004.

³⁸ Budlender, 2007, *ibid.*, page 24.

Gender: There does not seem to be any conclusive evidence that gender contributes to absenteeism. Moseki (2004) found that in the Northern Cape males were more likely to be absent without authorization, but that this difference was not statistically significant. There is nevertheless a gender dimension to some of the factors that contribute to learner absenteeism (particularly in South Africa) i.e. the negative impact of violence and sexual harassment and assault and the dangers associated with walking to school is increased for female learners.

Learning Disabilities/ Learning difficulties/Difficulty coping academically: A number of authors³⁹ have argued that learners who admitted having learning problems (or were less academically successful), were more likely to be absent without authorisation.

Psychological Dysfunction/ Problems: There is some evidence to suggest that (particularly among wealthier learners and in developed countries) psychological problems such as poor social skills and low self-esteem result in absenteeism.⁴⁰

3.4.2 Socio-economic reasons

Lack of Parental involvement: Authors⁴¹ in the subject area report a positive correlation between parental/ care-giver involvement in learner education and attendance. According to the 2005 CSSR report, the more adults there are in a household, the more likely it is that the individual concerned will be in school.

Dysfunctional/ Disintegrated Family structures: This is an important factor influencing the extent of learner absenteeism in South Africa. In a study conducted in the Eastern Cape, teachers reported that 74% of learners were affected by problems relating to an unstable home environment (including poverty, physical and mental disabilities and social and emotional needs.⁴²) International literature supports the argument that unstable or insecure home environments contribute to absenteeism.⁴³

³⁹ Wittenberg M 2005, Moseki M 2004, HSRC 2005, Railsback J 2004

⁴⁰ Tasmania Government Publications 2002, Moseki. 2004, Railsback J 2004

⁴¹ Railsback J 2004, Wittenberg M. 2005, Moseki M. 2004

⁴² "Comprehensive Evaluation Programme: Drop-out and Repetition Rate Longitudinal Study: Grades 8-12 Year One 2004" (Abridged Report)

⁴³ Kinder, Wakefield et al 1996, Edward S et al 2002, Tasmania Government Publications 2002

Food insecurity: It is estimated that 14 percent of South African children go to school having had either nothing to eat or only a cup of tea in the morning – in the Limpopo province the estimate is as high as 22 percent.⁴⁴ School feeding/nutrition programmes, therefore, contribute significantly to increased attendance. The National School Nutrition Programme which is administered by the Department of Education and which fed approximately five million children in 16 000 schools at a cost of R838 million is a step in the right direction, but is not yet sufficient.⁴⁵ During the South African Human Rights Commission's public hearings on the basic right to education in 2006 a number of criticisms⁴⁶ of the programme were raised. These include; (1) the programme stops feeding children at a particular grade and does not extend to secondary schools and (2) the reliability of the service was questionable in some areas.

Urban vs. Rural: In South Africa, children on farms are reportedly much less likely to attend school than children living in urban areas⁴⁷. The CSSR (2005)⁴⁸ reported that when compared to the base category of urban formal areas, attendance is about two percentage points lower in urban informal areas, five percentage points lower in the previous homeland areas and fourteen percentage points lower in the commercial farming areas. This discrepancy can in part be explained by the unique pressures experienced by learners who attend rural schools. Rural learners tend to be engaged in time-consuming domestic and agricultural chores and transport to schools is particularly inadequate in rural areas.

Child Labour: Studies have found that one of the most common reasons for children not attending school in South Africa (and particularly in rural areas) is that their families need them to work. Children have extensive domestic duties. An estimated 38 percent of South African learners engage in some form of household/domestic labour such as cooking or cleaning, with African girls most likely to have these responsibilities. Many rural learners spend a certain amount of time each day, both before and after school, on domestic and agricultural chores, such as herding cattle or fetching firewood or water. A comprehensive picture of child labour was arguably provided by a study conducted in 1999 by Statistics South Africa, which collected and analysed data on activities of children aged between five and 17, in relation to both economic and non-economic tasks. The study reported that 45

⁴⁴ HSRC. 2005.

⁴⁵ SAHRC 2006

⁴⁶ Interestingly, many of these criticisms/ recommendations were also recorded during out fieldwork. In particular, calls to extend the feeding schemes to secondary and high-schools.

⁴⁷ Zafar S et al 2006, HSRC. 2005, Wittenberg. M. 2005

⁴⁸ Wittenberg M. 2005

percent of South African children (or 6.04 million) were engaged in some kind of work-related activities, using the low time-based cut-off points. This was defined as at least one hour of labour per week for economic activities. When using a higher cut-off point for economic activities of three hours or more per week, the number of children engaged in such activities was 36 percent or 4.82 million children. The study reports that the majority of children engaged in such activities were in apartheid created former homelands, especially the deep rural areas. Children in deep rural areas (12 percent) were most likely to do economic work of three hours or more per week, followed by those in commercial farms (11 percent). Their activities are mostly in unpaid family enterprises such as agriculture and micro-enterprises. The main activities that children were involved in were (1) collecting firewood or water, (2) commercial and subsistence agriculture, (3) retail and wholesale, (4) family businesses, (5) school-related work e.g. cleaning and maintenance of school grounds, (6) paid domestic and (7) other household chores. Boys' work is mainly agricultural, in the fields and with animals. Girls' work is mainly around the house. And this survey is not exhaustive and missed some key elements of child labour such as child prostitution.⁴⁹

Even at schools learners are expected to work, and spend a part of each day cleaning the classroom, and applying cattle dung to the floors.⁵⁰ The analysis of the Labour Force Survey data (2006) on school attendance and work suggests that for the age group 10 to 17 years, school attendance was slightly higher for those who had not engaged in any work over the past twelve months (at 97%) compared to those who had worked (94%).⁵¹

Transport. It is estimated that one fifth⁵² of South Africa's learners get to school late (i.e. partial absenteeism). Inadequate public transport systems and poverty combine to contribute to late coming and absenteeism (and in some cases to drop-outs). In fact, the South African Human Rights Commission found during its 2006 public hearings⁵³ on the right to basic education that transport costs are often a far greater financial burden on parents and caregivers than school fees are. This is irrespective of the National Department of Education's policy to assist learners who have to walk further than five kilometres per day.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Statistics South Africa 2001 cited in Zafar S et al 2005, Also see Budlender D 2006 for similar findings

⁵⁰ HSRC Emerging Voices 2005. Wittenberg M. 2005

⁵¹ Budlender, 2007, op cit.

⁵² Wittenberg M. 2005

⁵³ SAHRC 2006, for more information and examples on the negative impact of transport costs on attendance also see Zafar et al 2006, also see Tasmania Government Publications 2002 for an additional example of the negative effect of transport costs on the ability of poor learner to attend school.

⁵⁴ For more information and examples of interventions to assist learners with transport see Zafar S et al 2005

In many cases, it is both expensive and threatening to walk to school, especially for girls. The long distances to school increase the chance of road accidents and the threat from criminals, who in some areas have been known to rob or rape learners going to school.⁵⁵

HIV/AIDS: HIV/AIDS is potentially an important factor in determining the extent of learner absenteeism in South Africa. In 2004, the National Household HIV Prevalence and Risk Survey of South African Children found that HIV/AIDS was prevalent in 5.4% of children aged 2 to 18. There was no significant difference by gender or age group within the 2-18 year band.⁵⁶ One source places the number of secondary school learners living with HIV at 500,000.⁵⁷

The impact of HIV/AIDS on learners' households is also likely to affect learner absenteeism. The HIV Prevalence and Risk Survey found that the maternal orphan rate is 3.3% for children aged 2-18, and that around 10% of children will have lost a caregiver by 9 years of age, rising to around 15% by the time they reach 14 years of age. The survey reports that at least one quarter of children (25%) aged 15-18 have lost at least one caregiver. Three percent of children aged 12 to 18 were the head of the household. In addition to these findings, the survey found that 45% of children live in homes where there is not enough money for food and clothes.⁵⁸

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS and its impact on the families of learners' is likely to place more pressure on some learners to remain at home to care for ailing family members, do household chores, or find employment. The Department spokesperson for the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education is reported by Daily News reporters as having said that Learner Absenteeism is a direct result of HIV/AIDS, either because some children have to look after their siblings in child-headed households, or because they don't eat properly and become sick.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ HSRC Emerging Voices 2005

⁵⁶ Brookes, H., Shisana, O., and Richter, L. (2004) "The National Household HIV Prevalence and Risk Survey of South African Children", (HSRC Press)

⁵⁷ Buchel, A. J. (2006) "The Leadership Role of the Principal in Dealing with the Impact of HIV/AIDS in South African Schools" (University of South Africa) (p8)

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

⁵⁹ Daily News Reporters, "AIDS Claims Young Lives: Most Positive Tests in 15-24 Age Bracket" (December 1 2006) in (<http://www.iolhiv aids.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=1592&fArticleId=3571666>)

HIV/AIDS also appears to have affected educator absenteeism, which in turn contributes towards Learner Absenteeism. Buchel (2006), citing research by Khangale (2005:1) states that in 2004 more than 4000 South African teachers died of HIV/AIDS, and that a further 45,000 (12% of the teacher workforce) is reported to be HIV-positive.⁶⁰

Teenage Pregnancy: Research on education in South African rural communities found that teenage pregnancy, absenteeism, poverty and unemployment are causally inter-related. The report on this research states that: "Being a mother provides a sense of importance and purpose that many young people lack when they live in deprived conditions. Sometimes having a child is a positive and rational decision from the viewpoint of certain teenagers, especially if they feel that education has little to offer."⁶¹ While pregnancy contributes to absenteeism in the short-term, in the longer-term pregnancy tends to result in drop-out from school.⁶²

3.4.3 School-based reasons/contributing factors

Subject Matter: Subject matter and particularly boredom with the school curriculum has been reported as contributing to absenteeism. Survey findings in various cities in the United Kingdom, for example, revealed that Mathematics and Science lessons are most frequently missed by learners.⁶³ In a study of the causes of absenteeism conducted by the Department of Education situated in Glasgow, many learners said that the reason that they wanted to miss school was boredom.⁶⁴

School Fees: There is substantial evidence⁶⁵ to suggest that the requirement to pay school fees contributes to absenteeism. Although Phurutse (2005) observes that there is substantial variation in the average annual school fees across the provinces, with Gauteng charging the

⁶⁰ Buchel, A. J. (2006) "The Leadership Role of the Principal in Dealing with the Impact of HIV/AIDS in South African Schools" (University of South Africa) (<http://etd.unisa.ac.za/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-08022006-124509/unrestricted/00front.pdf>)

⁶¹ HSRC, 2005. Emerging Voices – A Report on Education in South African Rural Communities. Researched for the Nelson Mandela Foundation. HSRC Press, page 60.

⁶² HSRC, *ibid.*

⁶³ Moseki M. 2004

⁶⁴ Malcolm H et al 2003. For similar findings see also Research in Education 2002, and Kinder, Wakefield et al 1996, and Tasmania Government Publications 2002 & for information particular to South Africa see Budlender D 2006

⁶⁵ Zafar S et al 2005, Railsback J 2004, HSRC Emerging Voices 2005

most (an average of R800) and Free State charging the least (average of R100),⁶⁶ it has been reported that; “School fees and other costs such as uniforms and books are among the key barriers preventing school attendance.”⁶⁷

Learner to Educator Ratio: The Provincial Budgets and Expenditure Review reported that by 2004 there were 13.9 million participants in the South African education system. The average learner - educator ratio in 2005 was 32.9 learners per educator.⁶⁸ In 2003, the highest learner to educator ratio was found in the Western Cape (35:1), Mpumalanga (25:1) and KwaZulu-Natal (36:1). The mainly rural provinces tend to have proportionally more schools with fewer learners than the more urbanised provinces, which tend to have proportionally fewer schools with more learners.⁶⁹ An HSRC national survey in 2005 found that 64 percent of the classes in Limpopo, 60 percent of the classes in Mpumalanga, 59 percent of the classes in the Eastern Cape and 22 percent of the classes in the Northern Cape and Western Cape had classes consisting of 46 pupils.⁷⁰

Learner and Educator Relationships: The literature⁷¹ surveyed suggests that authorised and unauthorised absenteeism rates are lower in cases where relationships between learners and educators are positive. Moseki’s study of truancy also focussed on the relationship of educators to learners. It suggests that unauthorised absenteeism and truancy, in particular, occurs because some learners avoid certain teachers. Moseki states: “Negative attitudes displayed by some educators may drive certain learners out of the school.....insults and humiliating remarks by educators lead to school non-attendance.”⁷²

Competence of Educators: The South African Human Rights Commission found during its 2006 public hearings that although there are “many teachers who are passionate, committed and hard working, there is evidence of many teachers who have low morale, spend too little time in the classroom, are unqualified, are not sufficiently trained in the new curriculum, use

⁶⁶ Phurutse, M. C. (2005) “Factors Affecting Teaching and Learning in South African Public Schools” (HSRC Press: 2005)

⁶⁷ Zafar S, op cit., page 36.

⁶⁸ National Treasury “Provincial Budgets and Expenditure Review: 2002/3-2008/9”, Republic of South Africa (<http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/ifr/2006/prov/13.%20Annexure%20B%20-20%Non-financial%20Tables.pdf>, January 12 2007)

⁶⁹ Department of Education (2005) “Education Statistics in South Africa at a glance in 2003”, Republic of South Africa

⁷⁰ HSRC Media Release 2005

⁷¹ Research in Education 2002, Kinder, Wakefield et al 1996, Moseki. 2004, Malcolm H et al 2003

outdated teaching methods in classes that are too big and who are disconnected from the communities in which they teach".⁷³ The finding on low morale is supported by findings from a 2005 HSRC national survey on the supply and demand of educators in South African public schools, which found that 55 percent of educators have considered leaving the education profession due to inadequate remuneration, workload, lack of career development, professional recognition, dissatisfaction with work policies and job security.⁷⁴ As is the case in difficult learner-educator relationships, the competence and general enthusiasm of educators may contribute to learners avoiding certain classes and educators by absenting themselves.

Punishment for late-coming: International literature⁷⁵ suggests that schools that employ coercive methods to combat absenteeism have less success than schools that employ inclusive methods (i.e. involving learners, parents and the school in a open and supportive way) to encourage attendance. Nevertheless, South African learners reported to the HSRC that punishment for late-coming at many schools was so severe that they would rather stay away from school on those days when they are very late (even with legitimate excuses). It was also found that many schools still practice corporal punishment and that learners would engage in unauthorised absenteeism in order to avoid such punishment.⁷⁶

Violence in Schools (excluding corporal punishment): There is consensus in the local and international literature⁷⁷ that bullying contributes to absenteeism. Studies⁷⁸ have shown that South African schools are sometimes places of intolerance and human rights violations that include sexual harassment, sexual assault, bullying and abuse. Buchel (2006) cites a media source, saying that as much as a third of all child abuse cases in South Africa are perpetrated by teachers⁷⁹, while a study in the Eastern Cape revealed that 94% of Grade 1 learners expressed concerns over school-related violence in the classroom and the playground.⁸⁰ A second study from the Eastern Cape reports that 67% of learners in Grades

⁷² Moseki, 2004, op cit., page 35.

⁷³ SAHRC Public Hearings 2006

⁷⁴ HSRC Media Release 2005

⁷⁵ Reid. 1987, Reynolds. 1987, Felsenstein. 1987

⁷⁶ HSRC Emerging Voices 2005, See also SAHRC Public Hearings 2006

⁷⁷ Malcolm H et al 2003

⁷⁸ HSRC Emerging Voices 2005

⁷⁹ Buchel, A. J. (2006) "The Leadership Role of the Principal in Dealing with the Impact of HIV/AIDS in South African Schools" (University of South Africa) (p10)

⁸⁰ "Imbewu II Comprehensive Evaluation: 7-Year Longitudinal Learner Study on Dropout and Repetition: Baseline Study- Grade 1:2003" (Abridged Report)

1 to 7 mentioned some form of abusive behaviour as their main dislike about school.⁸¹ During its 2006 public hearings the South African Human Rights Commission⁸² found evidence of male teachers coercing sex from girls (even exchanging food for sex), and of male teachers and learners that subject girls across South Africa to sexual abuse and harassment at school on a daily basis. The result of this violence is a loss of interest in school, increasing absenteeism and eventually dropping out of school altogether. In addition to sexual abuse, South African schools are reportedly being infiltrated by gangsters and drugs. In our fieldwork (see analysis section of this report) we found that gangsterism and drug-dealing were negatively affecting attendance rates, particularly in the Western Cape where learners would stay at home during “gang wars”. The South African Human Rights Commission has pointed out a link between increased crime and violence in schools and the apparent lack of security at schools. At the public hearings, learners recounted how gangsters come onto school property through holes in school fences. The Commission argues that schools should be provided with security guards and other security measures to ensure that schools are no longer soft-targets for crime.

Poor School Facilities: Various studies⁸³ and research projects have found that there are schools that do not have flush toilets and/or electricity. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that poor school facilities contribute to absenteeism. During our fieldwork, for example, one or two interviewees indicated (during informal discussions) that girl learners tended to stay at home when they were menstruating because the sanitation facilities at schools were inadequate.

3.4.4 Other

Time of the week/ season/ year: There is some evidence to suggest that attendance is higher in the middle of the week (Wednesday and Thursday) and lower on Fridays.⁸⁴ Absenteeism rates are reportedly higher in winter and at the start of the school year.⁸⁵

3.5 Managing learner absenteeism: International best practice

Murgatroyd (1987) outlines 5 broad strategies for combating persistent absenteeism:

⁸¹ “Comprehensive Evaluation Programme: Drop-out and Repetition Rate Longitudinal Study: Grades 8-12 Year One 2004” (Abridged Report)

⁸² SAHRC 2006, See also HSRC Emerging Voices 2005 for more detail on the violence and humiliation to which girls are subjected.

⁸³ HSRC. 2005

⁸⁴ Moseki 2004

⁸⁵ HSRC Emerging Voices 2005

- Student learning contracts: individual instruction which is negotiated by learner and school;
- Home visits: improving links between home and school. (This method was also successfully used by the Social Exclusion Unit in the United Kingdom⁸⁶).
- Remediation: correct skill deficits which may have encouraged absenteeism;
- The open school approach: the nature of school is changed so that a variety of learning approaches are used to encourage motivation to learning; and
- The Counselling Approach: It is assumed that Learner Absenteeism results from a variety of motivational modes, and that consequently individual counselling is needed.⁸⁷

Reynolds (1987) has identified additional factors associated with high performing schools which have, amongst other things, curbed learner absenteeism. They include:

- Purposeful leadership by the principal, marked by power-sharing and consultation;
- Involvement of the deputy principal in policy decisions;
- Involvement of teachers in curriculum planning and curriculum guidelines, as well as class allocations⁸⁸;
- Consistency amongst teachers in terms of teaching approach;
- A structured day marked by teacher supervision as well as learner-freedom within the structure;
- Intellectually challenging teaching approach (marked by 'higher order' questions and statements);
- A work-centred environment;
- A limited focus within sessions;
- Maximum communication between teachers and pupils (especially communication with groups or the whole class);
- Thorough record-keeping of pupil progress;
- Parental involvement (reading at home, educational visits). In the United States, for example, many very successful truancy programmes contain components that provide intensive monitoring, counselling and other family-strengthening services to truants and their families.⁸⁹
- A positive climate in the classroom (less emphasis on punishment and more on reward).⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

⁸⁷ Murgatroyd, S. (1987) *Combating Truancy: A Counselling Approach* in *Combating School Absenteeism* (Ed: K. Reid), Stodder and Houghton, (p122)

⁸⁸ Also see Edward S et al 2002 for more on the importance of curriculum

⁸⁹ Railsback J 2004, Tasmania Government Publications 2002

⁹⁰ Reynolds, D. (1987) *School Effectiveness and Truancy* in "Combating School Absenteeism" (Ed: K Reid) Hodder and Stoughton. See also Railsback J 2004

A useful source of measures taken to manage absenteeism in the UK, the US and Australia is to be found in the Hargreaves Report: "Improving Secondary Schools", released by the Inner London Education Authority. Amongst other things, the report associates good practice in maintaining an effective attendance policy with:

- A senior teacher being charged with the specific responsibility for pupil attendance;
- A list of absentees being produced quickly, ideally by morning break, for use by appropriate teaching and office staff;
- A sensitive scheme for the immediate follow-up of the absentees (by letter or telephone). (In an assessment of approaches and methods utilised in the United Kingdom it was also found that the "key to success" was to always contact the parents immediately).⁹¹
- Heads of year and teachers with responsibility for pupil attendance having regular meetings with welfare officers;
- Regular 'spot checks' for specific lesson truancy;
- Rewards for pupils or classes with regular attendance. This strategy has also been successfully employed by the Social Exclusion Unit in the United Kingdom and by many schools in the United States.⁹²
- Penalties for students who are persistently late⁹³; and
- Absentees and truants being welcomed back to school and efforts made to reintegrate them socially and academically. A similar approach was followed in Victoria, Australia⁹⁴ where it was found that suspensions from school was not a suitable deterrent for truants, and that it was more useful to maintain the student-school link.

The report also focuses on changing the curriculum, emphasising choice, coherence, breadth, balance and structure, and increasing vocational training. The report suggests that the curriculum should ensure that pupils exercise oral as well as listening, reading and writing skills, and that topics and relevant issues are raised in class to stimulate learners to express their opinions.⁹⁵

Further practical means for curbing absenteeism are suggested by Felsenstein (1987) who states that each school should have procedures for collating absences and sensitive

⁹¹ Tasmania Government Publications 2002

⁹² Tasmania Government Publications 2002

⁹³ For examples of successful penalties utilised in the Unites States see Tasmania Government Publications 2002

⁹⁴ Tasmania Government Publications 2002

⁹⁵ Reid, K. (1987) *The Hargreaves Report, School Improvement and Absenteeism* in *Combating School Absenteeism*, (Ed: K Reid) Stodder and Houghton (p203). See also Railsback 2004.

strategies for following them up either by telephone or letter. He adds that schools should also be in close co-operation with appropriate supporting agencies.⁹⁶

In addition to these corrective means, researchers have suggested rehabilitative and preventive measures to deal with learner absenteeism. These include the creation of on-site sanctuaries for learners with difficult home circumstances or poor relationships with teachers.⁹⁷ This approach should include the establishment of ongoing truancy prevention programmes as have been utilised in the United States.

Citing international literature, Moseki (2004) mentions additional measures for managing truancy in schools. They include:

- Tutoring and mentoring systems for learners with learning difficulties. In the United Kingdom this includes programmes to deal with children's literacy and numeracy problems so that they could "catch up". Including after hours learning and summer schools for students who truant because lessons are too difficult.
- Counselling and therapy. This method has also been successfully utilised in Victoria, Australia.⁹⁸
- The use of a variety of instructional approaches for learners with different learning abilities;
- Effective monitoring, recording and registration of attendance. In Victoria Australia this is done electronically.⁹⁹
- Provision of life-skills education; and
- Working with other departments to ensure learner attendance (particular mention is made of the Departments of Safety and Security and Social Services)¹⁰⁰

Additional measures employed in the United Kingdom (not captured by the authors listed above) include¹⁰¹:

⁹⁶ Felsenstein, D. (1987) *Strategies for Improving School Attendance* in "Combating School Absenteeism (Ed: K Reid) Hodder and Stoughton

⁹⁷ Felsenstein, D. (1987) *Strategies for Improving School Attendance* in "Combating School Absenteeism (Ed: K Reid) Hodder and Stoughton

⁹⁸ Also see Edwards et al 2002 for more on importance of providing emotional support and addressing behavioural needs. See also Railsback J 2004

⁹⁹ For more information and a discussion on The Electronic Roll Marking Project see Tasmania Government Publications 2002. See also Railsback J 2004

¹⁰⁰ Moseki, M. M. (2004) "The Nature of Truancy and the Lifeworld of Truants in Secondary Schools" University of South Africa. For examples of similar innovative approaches in New Zealand see Tasmania Government Publications 2002

¹⁰¹ See Railsback J 2004 for an example and best practices from the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children in this regard. See also Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

- Truancy “watch-schemes” involving local businesses and the police. This method is also employed in the United States and New South Wales (Australia).
- Introduction of extra curricular activities such as breakfast clubs, after school clubs, study support and vocational training.

Additional measures employed in the United States (not captured by the authors discussed above) include:

- The recognition that absenteeism in all its facets is the product of a range of factors and that successful strategies have to combat the root causes of absenteeism. This includes initiating tutoring programmes, additional security measures to combat bullying or drug use, drug prevention measures, mentoring efforts, campaigns for involving parents in their children’s school attendance and referrals to social service agencies.¹⁰² As the findings from our fieldwork (see subsequent section of the report) will show, interventions aimed at reducing absenteeism in South Africa will have to be much broader. The socio-economic inequities that characterize our society and which are a direct result of the unjust policies of the Apartheid system need to be addressed. Absenteeism in South Africa is about poverty, therefore, factors like the provision of infrastructure and public transport, food, and free schooling become much more important.

Lessons from the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia indicate that the National Department of Education can also play a role in reducing absenteeism by;

- Holding schools accountable for attendance. In the United Kingdom public schools are expected to set and meet attendance targets and the worst performing schools are monitored.¹⁰³
- Ensuring that the curriculum is appropriate and ensuring that educators have the required skills to teach it.¹⁰⁴

3.5.1 Attendance policies at schools

An international best practice at school level, highlighted in the literature reviewed, is that schools that have been more successful at reducing and managing learner absenteeism have attendance polices. Good attendance polices, authors¹⁰⁵ argue:

¹⁰² Tasmania Government Publications 2002, See Railsback J 2004 on early intervention strategies.

¹⁰³ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹⁰⁴ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹⁰⁵ Morris M et al 2004, Railsback J 2004 & Staffordshire Department of Education 2001

- Are based on principles that apply to the entire community in which the school is located.
- Promote effective learning and teaching about positive behaviour and regular attendance.
- Clearly define the role of learners, educators and principals in promoting positive behaviour and regular attendance.
- Include an explicit set of standards or a code of conduct for behaviour and attendance.
- Clearly stipulates what the rewards are to encourage positive behaviour and regular attendance.
- Indicate what support is available for pupils whose misbehaviour or attendance records reflect significant learning or personal problems.
- Specify what support and training is available to help staff manage challenging pupil behaviour and absence.
- Specify what support is available for parents who wish to learn more about how to improve behaviour and support attendance.
- Ensures that staff, parents/caregivers and learners are consulted during policy formulation processes.
- Specifies what resources the school has available/ will use to improve behaviour and attendance.
- Set out clearly how the policy will be monitored and reviewed.
- Set high expectations for students, foster self-discipline among students and create a positive school climate and community.

3.6 Monitoring learner absenteeism: International best practice

There is no international standard for recording and tracking learner absenteeism. For instance, the multilateral United Nations bodies such as UNESCO and UNICEF are more concerned with initiatives such as 'Education for All' and other Millennium Development Goals (MDG) goals, which have more immediacy and relevance at a global level since the basic right to education has yet to be met in many countries. It appears that learner absenteeism is not a high priority concern in the less developed regions of the world, although it might be dealt with through broader initiatives targeting more pressing educational objectives.

In the more developed regions of the world, where well-functioning education systems are in place, learner absenteeism is a pressing concern and the education departments of these countries invest relatively more significant resources to specifically record, track, monitor and

manage the problem of learner absenteeism. The two countries with well developed attendance policy directives, regulations and data gathering are the United States and England.¹⁰⁶ The following discussion focuses on three main absenteeism issues in the countries:

- The systems in place to record, track and monitor absenteeism
- The collation and aggregation of administrative data at different levels of the education systems
- The kinds of information reported on

3.6.1 Policies and Definitions on Learner Absenteeism: United States and United Kingdom

In the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), the national education departments have holistic approaches to the problem of absenteeism – systems to address the problem are multi-pronged, covering attendance policies, as well as regulating data collection and providing strategies and guidelines for management of the problem.

Policies are regarded as an important starting point from which to deal with the issue of poor learner attendance. Central to both English and American attendance policies is the differentiation between authorized/ excused and unauthorized/ unexcused absences. This is the key distinction made in terms of absenteeism. Unauthorised/ unexcused absences are basically understood as cases of truancy. The UK ‘Minister of State for Schools and 14-19 year old learners’ refers to ‘persistent truants’ as those with 20 days or more unauthorized absence over a year (absence not sanctioned by an educational manager).¹⁰⁷

The primary distinction between ‘authorized’ and ‘unauthorized’ absences informs the way data is collected on attendance, as well as the analysis of this data. The British education department makes the distinction as follows:

“Authorised absence is absence with permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes instances of absences for which a satisfactory explanation has been provided (for example illness).

Unauthorised absence is absence without permission from a teacher or other authorized representative of the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹⁰⁷ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹⁰⁸ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

According to the Staffordshire Education Department's Attendance Policy 2001¹⁰⁹, registers must be marked with this crucial distinction in mind. The policy outlines four 'registration'¹¹⁰ categories – "present", "attending an approved education activity; this is counted as present (provided they actually attend)", "authorized absent" and "unauthorized absent". It is a legal requirement that "Each absence mark must distinguish authorised from unauthorised". Distinguishing authorized from unauthorized absences is clearly essential according to the policy:

- (1) "If the distinction between "authorised" and "unauthorised" cannot be made at the time, it must be made "as soon as practicable after the reason for the absence is established"
- (2) There are only three clearly-outlined grounds for authorizing an absence:
 - the child has been granted leave of absence by the proprietor of the school
 - the child is unable to attend due to an "unavoidable cause" such as illness, religious holiday or the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) failure to meet certain requirements (for transport, for instance)
 - the child is attending another school/ unit where he/she is registered
- (3) If the child is not sick or absent for some unavoidable cause, the absence can only be authorized as "leave" by the school (not the parent)

The importance of the distinction becomes clear when the process of data collection, as well as targeting issues are considered. In terms of targeting for instance, in 2002, the Department placed, in the new LEA Development Plans for Britain, a requirement on schools with above average unauthorised absentee rates to set targets for improvement.

The Attendance Policies of the LEAs provide clear guidelines what can be considered a valid or authorized absence, as well as on recording the different types of absences. Codes are provided to distinguish kinds of absences and the different reasons for absences. The data collection authority in the Education Department provides a basic guiding framework of codes to be used for recording absence. Below are some of the codes used:

- # Holiday for all (no mark entered)**
To be used when the whole school is closed, including for the teachers.

¹⁰⁹ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹¹⁰ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

- * Not on roll (no mark entered)**
To be used to fill up the individual yearly record for a pupil who becomes a registered pupil after the beginning of the school year or who leaves before the end.
- / Present at registration a.m. (present)**
For all pupils present at registration in the morning.
- \ Present at registration p.m. (present)**
For all pupils present at registration in the afternoon
- @ Late after registration closes or for no good reason (unauthorised absent)**
It is a matter for individual school policy to define when registration closes. It should not normally last longer than 30 minutes. This mark is for children who will not be credited with an attendance, even though they attended for part of the session. Note that it counts as unauthorised absence.
- B Dual registration/ child being marked at another school (authorised absent)**
- C Other authorised circumstances (authorised absent)**
This covers all circumstances where the headteacher has granted "leave", which are not covered elsewhere, e.g. bereavement, family problems, weddings etc.
- E Excluded (authorised absent)**
This includes all fixed term exclusions and permanent exclusions until all the representation procedures have been completed. The child should not be removed from the admission register on the day of the exclusion itself.
- H Holiday leave approved in advance (authorised absent)**
School policy should define the procedures and how many days are available to parents. This is intended for children going away on an annual holiday, not for days out (which should not be authorised unless the school agrees, using C above).
- L Late before registration closes/ for an acceptable reason (present)**
This is for children who are only a little bit late (within the registration period) or who come in at the first reasonable opportunity. Note that this is present.
- M Illness and medical or dental appointments (authorised absent)**
Only for use where the pupil misses the whole session. (Use L if they come in late after a medical appointment. If they need to leave school for an appointment or go home ill, there is no need to change the original present mark).
- N No reason yet provided - temporary mark (unauthorised absent)**
This is an interim mark which should be converted to a permanent mark before the monthly printout of registers is made. There should be no Ns in the final version. If no adequate explanation had been provide, N should be converted to O.
- O No satisfactory explanation received by deadline (unauthorised absent)**
The permanent mark for all absences which have never been properly accounted for by parents.
- P Approved sporting activity or attending alternative educational provision (e.g. home tuition and still on roll) (present)**
Note that this counts as an attendance.

- R Religious festival for child's family (authorised absent)**
Should be used for any major festival in any religious community. (There is no set limit on the number of days).
- S Study leave (authorised absent)**
Should only be used in Years 10 and 11.
- V Educational visit (present)**
School-organised trips and visits, including residential trips. Can also be used for other trips of a strictly educational nature which are arranged by other organisations, provided they are supervised (not family holidays).
- W Work experience, vocational and college courses (present)**
Only Y10 and 11 pupils can do work experience, which must be supervised by the school or it would be illegal employment. (There is no maximum permitted number of days). Note that this is present (as long as the child attends as agreed.)

There is not a single attendance policy for Britain, but more or less comprehensive ones for different LEAs (Local Education Authorities), which have some consistency with each other. The importance of policies to regulate and enforce the monitoring and management of absenteeism is emphasized in practices of the British education department. The most comprehensive policy, that of the Staffordshire LEA¹¹¹ outlines key areas of legislation and regulation, one of the most important being 'School Registers':

- Registers are legal documents and as such Attendance and Admission registers must be kept (either manually or on computer) by Head teachers and governing bodies. The keeping of registers is strictly regulated:

"Both kinds of register, if kept manually, must be written in ink with corrections distinguishable from the original (ER95 No.14) and kept for three years (ER95 No.15). Computerised Admission Registers must be printed out annually and Attendance Registers monthly, then bound into annual volumes. (ER95 No.16 (2) and (3)). Once the monthly attendance printout has been made, it should not be changed subsequently. All the absences which are unaccounted for (N) should be turned into permanently unauthorised (O) before the printout is made...LEA maintained schools must make their registers available for inspection by "any officer of the LEA authorised for the purpose" (ER95 No.11). Such a person must also be permitted to make copies of extracts from the registers; e.g. for prosecution of parents (ER95 No.12). The head teacher is required to sign that such copies are accurate and to account for any discrepancies."

- It is a legal requirement that the attendance register be marked "at the beginning of each a.m. session and at some point during the p.m. session".

¹¹¹ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

- All register entries should be made in ink
- All staff must be aware of the standards for taking register
- Schools are legally required to “inform the LEA of children who ‘fail to attend school regularly’ or who are continuously absent for more than two weeks ‘without adequate explanation’”. “School staff should ensure that such children are referred to the Education Welfare Service under agreed procedures. Formal register checks will also be carried out twice a year to advise on practice”.

The policy requirements of the Department of Education and Skills are that all schools in Britain keep registers in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations 2006. The following is regulated:

- Contents of the Admissions Register
- Contents of the Attendance Register
- Leave of Absence
- Deletions from the Admissions Register
- Dual Registration of children with no fixed abode
- Inspection of the registers
- Extracts from the registers
- Returns
- Method of making of entries
- Preservation of the registers
- Use of computers

The following systems are also in place to regulate and monitor the maintenance of registers, and of attendance:

- Inspections of registers:
 - of a maintained school by local authority officer;
 - of any school by Ofsted inspectors;
 - either can take extracts of the registers.
- About absence to the local authority:
 - continuous unauthorised absence of 10 days or more;
 - failure to attend regularly.
- Data Protection Act 1998:
 - allows information to be shared;
 - allows inspection of registers;

- Manual Registers
 - still permitted.
- Electronic Registers
 - not mandatory to have lesson monitoring
- Amending the Registers:
 - to correct an error;
 - to note a change of details
 - when explanation is received for a pupil's absence.
- Storing the Registers:
 - can use electronic storage methods;
 - must be secure;
 - stored for three years after last entry

The deletion of learners from (admission and attendance) registers is also comprehensively regulated by the education policies.

3.6.2 Information that can be analysed based on policies, systems and type of data collected

The Department of Education and Skills provides annual national statistics on absenteeism/attendance which focuses on the 'authorized' /'unauthorized' absence distinction. In its 2002/03 revised document 'Pupil absence in schools in England', there are tables detailing absentee trends from the year 1996/97. The tables show the following information for day pupils of compulsory school age:

- levels of total absence across years, in terms of authorized/ unauthorized absences and percentages of half days missed:

TABLE 5 : AUTHORISED AND UNAUTHORISED PUPIL ABSENCE IN MAINTAINED PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND 2002/03

Local Education Authority	REVISED STATISTICS							
	PRIMARY SCHOOLS		SECONDARY SCHOOLS		PRIMARY SCHOOLS		SECONDARY SCHOOLS	
	Authorised 2002/03	Unauthorised 2002/03	Authorised 2002/03	Unauthorised 2002/03	Authorised 2001/02	Unauthorised 2001/02	Authorised 2001/02	Unauthorised 2001/02
Barking and Dagenham	5.38	1.37	7.53	1.91	5.47	1.52	8.38	2.04
Barnet	5.23	0.56	6.39	0.97	5.22	0.64	7.05	0.95
Barnsley	5.94	0.75	8.12	1.38	5.76	0.77	8.73	1.56
Bath & North East Somerset	4.83	0.32	7.21	0.83	5.05	0.33	6.96	1.08
Bedfordshire	5.32	0.21	6.56	0.42	4.97	0.21	6.33	0.41

TABLE 1: PUPIL ABSENCE BY TYPE OF SCHOOL IN ENGLAND : 1996/97 - 2002/03

	REVISED STATISTICS						
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
ALL SCHOOLS							
Number of day pupils of compulsory school age	7,011,816	6,977,346	7,071,573	7,102,287	7,176,173	7,188,176	7,185,823
Percentage of half days missed:							
authorised absence	6.53	6.54	6.34	6.14	6.54	6.30	6.13
unauthorised absence	0.70	0.74	0.73	0.71	0.73	0.72	0.70
total absences	7.23	7.28	7.07	6.85	7.27	7.02	6.83
Maintained Primary Schools(1)							
Number of day pupils of compulsory school age	3,770,801	3,730,357	3,734,768	3,719,189	3,741,370	3,704,091	3,665,172
Percentage of half days missed:							
authorised absence	5.58	5.71	5.39	5.19	5.59	5.40	5.38
unauthorised absence	0.48	0.50	0.49	0.47	0.49	0.45	0.43
total absences	6.06	6.21	5.89	5.66	6.08	5.85	5.81
Maintained Secondary Schools(1)(2)							
Number of day pupils of compulsory school age	2,790,039	2,786,943	2,872,670	2,917,639	2,956,915	3,003,651	3,035,938
Percentage of half days missed:							
authorised absence	8.06	7.91	7.81	7.58	7.98	7.63	7.21
unauthorised absence	1.01	1.10	1.07	1.04	1.07	1.09	1.07
total absences	9.07	9.01	8.88	8.62	9.04	8.72	8.28

- levels of authorized and unauthorized absence from maintained primary schools (including middle schools deemed primary) in each Local Education Authority (LEA) area;
- levels of authorized and unauthorized absence from maintained secondary schools (including middle schools deemed secondary) in each Local Education Authority area;

TABLE 2 : PUPIL ABSENCE IN MAINTAINED PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND IN 2002/03

	REVISED STATISTICS								
	All Schools (1)			Primary Schools			Secondary Schools		
Local Education Authority	Total Absence	Authorised Absence	Unauthorised Absence	Total Absence	Authorised Absence	Unauthorised Absence	Total Absence	Authorised Absence	Unauthorised Absence
Barking and Dagenham	7.89	6.29	1.60	6.74	5.38	1.37	9.44	7.53	1.91
Barnet	6.50	5.75	0.74	5.79	5.23	0.56	7.37	6.39	0.97
Barnsley	7.92	6.90	1.02	6.69	5.94	0.75	9.50	8.12	1.38
Bath and North East Somerset	6.60	6.02	0.57	5.15	4.83	0.32	8.03	7.21	0.83

An important measure is the percentage of half days missed compared across years, for primary as well as high schools. The information is shown according to Government Office Regions (Table 7).

**TABLE 7 : PUPIL ABSENCE IN MAINTAINED PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR EACH GOVERNMENT OFFICE REGION IN ENGLAND
REVISED STATISTICS**

Government Office Regions	Number of day pupils of compulsory school age	Total possible pupil sessions in thousands	Total sessions missed in thousands	% of half days missed primary 2002/03	% of half days missed primary 2001/02	% of half days missed primary 2000/01
ENGLAND	3,665,172	1,080,152	62,774	5.81	5.85	6.08
North East	180,945	54,312	3,214	5.92	5.87	6.18
North West	529,585	159,531	8,918	5.59	5.84	5.96
Yorkshire & the Humber	390,255	115,586	6,692	5.79	5.89	6.06
East Midlands	320,295	95,897	5,511	5.75	5.67	5.76
West Midlands	408,320	120,374	7,330	6.09	6.03	6.32
East of England	392,868	114,915	6,599	5.74	5.54	5.83
London	528,390	150,104	9,575	6.38	6.55	6.81
Inner London	192,592	53,331	3,587	6.73	7.12	7.35
Outer London	335,798	96,773	5,988	6.19	6.24	6.51
South East	568,808	167,521	9,231	5.51	5.56	5.81
South West	345,706	101,911	5,704	5.60	5.63	5.82

In addition to percentages of half days missed, authorized and unauthorized absence is also measured with regards to the 'number of pupils absent' and 'average number of half days missed'.

TABLE 6 : HALF DAYS MISSED PER PUPIL IN ENGLAND : ANALYSED BY LEA 2002/03

Local Education Authority	PRIMARY SCHOOLS						SECONDARY SCHOOLS			
	Number of day pupils of compulsory school age	AUTHORISED ABSENCE		UNAUTHORISED ABSENCE		Number of day pupils of compulsory school age	AUTHORISED ABSENCE		UNAUTHORISED ABSENCE	
		Number of pupils absent	Average number of half days missed	Number of pupils absent	Average number of half days missed		Number of pupils absent	Average number of half days missed	Number of pupils absent	Average number of half days missed
Barking and Dagenham	15,211	13,457	17	6,265	9	10,897	9,704	25	3,851	16
Barnet	22,290	19,940	17	4,318	9	17,926	16,403	21	3,324	15
Barnsley	17,572	16,407	19	4,279	9	13,489	12,859	26	4,277	13
Bath & North East Somerset	10,862	9,844	16	1,414	7	10,961	10,488	23	2,424	11
Wokingham	11,129	10,292	14	1,131	6	9,553	8,869	22	1,320	14
Wolverhampton	19,918	18,324	20	2,878	10	14,943	13,378	26	2,941	18
Worcestershire	33,029	30,588	17	2,608	7	37,976	34,424	23	6,132	14
York, City of	11,997	11,043	16	2,064	8	9,658	8,757	22	1,968	17
ENGLAND	3,665,172	3,368,509	17	564,664	8	3,035,938	2,814,562	23	631,669	15

The Department of Education and Skills published a 2004 report on attendance: 'Analysis of Pupil Attendance Data in Excellence in Cities (EiC) Areas: An Interim Report'¹¹² which provided statistical information such as:

- attendance rates: by year, grade and sex (across all schools in the sample)
- attendance rates: by school size (number of pupils), type (boys only, girls only, mixed, beacon, special) and location (government office region)
- authorized and unauthorized absences (average number of half days absent): by sex, free school meals, Special Educational Needs (SEN), English as an additional language, and level of English fluency.
- Authorized absence: by sex and ethnicity
- Unauthorized absence: by sex and ethnicity

The report also looks into the relationship between attendance and attainment, including producing complex probability graphs plotting, for instance, 'unauthorized absence and the probability of achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE' or 'attendance and the probability of achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE'.¹¹³ The comprehensive and detailed statistical analysis that is provided in the EiC report is enabled through the use of data that is collected from numerous sources¹¹⁴:

- Individual data on pupil attendance and level of English fluency obtained from pupil data forms returned by schools.
- Data on young people's sex, eligibility for free school meals, special educational needs, English as an additional language and (for 2001/02 only) ethnicity, obtained from pupil data forms in 2000/01 and Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) in 2001/02.
- Data on pupil prior attainment (at Key Stages 2 and 3) and attainment (at Key Stages 3 and 4) obtained from either the DfES's valued-added analysis (2000/01) or the National Pupil Database (2001/02).
- Background data obtained from the NFER's Register of Schools (ROS). This included data on schools' location, size, age range, management type (Foundation, maintained, voluntary aided, etc.), school type (grammar,

¹¹² Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹¹³ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹¹⁴ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

comprehensive, modern, etc.), aggregated profiles of SEN, free school meal eligibility, attainment profile, etc.

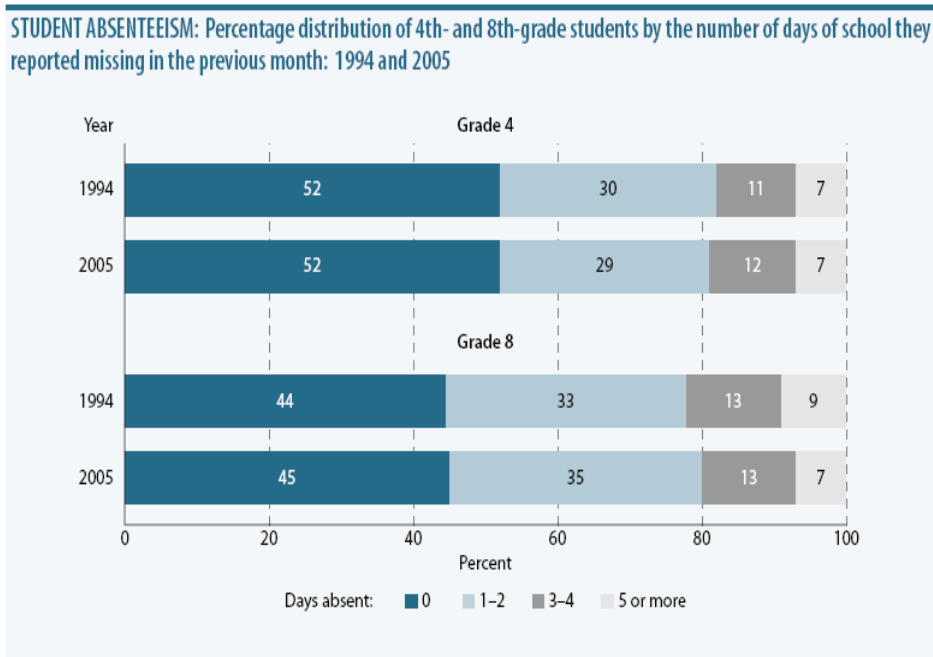
It is evident that the information required for comprehensive analysis is made available from a range of sources, where accurate, up-to-date and timely data can be found.

In the United States, the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) regards 'student absenteeism' as an important indicator for the condition of education in the country. "This indicator examines both the extent of absenteeism in 2005 among 4th- and 8th-graders during the preceding month and changes in the absenteeism rate since 1994".¹¹⁵ The collection of absenteeism data was conducted from 1994 to 2000 through asking students the question 'How many days of school did you miss last month?', and then, from 2001 onwards asking the question 'How many days were you absent from school in the last month?' Students can indicate either:

- perfect attendance,
- 1 or 2 days absent,
- 3 or 4 days absent, or
- 5 or more days absent

The information is then plotted on a graph enabling percentage comparisons across years, as well as trends in absenteeism over the years, as shown in the example below.

¹¹⁵ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002



Besides ‘grade’ absenteeism, information is also gathered in terms of a number of student characteristics such as:

- Sex
- Race/ ethnicity
- English language learner (yes/ no) [these learners were identified, prior to 2005, as Limited English Proficient (LEP)]
- Classified as having a disability (yes/ no)
- Language other than English spoken in home (yes/ no)
- Student eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (eligible/ not eligible)
- School location (central city, urban fringe/ large town, rural/ small town)

Student absenteeism data is presented by the NCES according to grade, year and the characteristics indicated above.

There is some early 1990s US Bureau of the Census data that also compared absenteeism rates for 8th and 12th graders with, among other things, “parents’ education level”.¹¹⁶

In the United States, the submission of attendance data is mandatory as it is one component of data required “to serve as the basis for timely distribution of Federal funds”¹¹⁷. It is clear

¹¹⁶ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹¹⁷ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

from the following statement that attendance data forms a crucial part of information gathering for the US Education Department. “The report from SEAs [State Educational Agencies] includes attendance, revenue, and expenditure data from which NCES determines the average State per pupil expenditure (SPPE) for elementary and secondary education”. SEAs are urged to submit accurate and complete data with the ‘warning’ that submitted data is subject to audit and that if any inaccuracies are discovered in the data, the Department would seek recovery of overpayments (ibid).

3.6.3 Electronic systems – how important are they?

In dealing with a problem such as learner absenteeism, English schools have 2 short term tracking and monitoring systems that work in tandem – (1) school registration systems and then immediate (2) follow-up procedures. School registration systems involve the processing of attendance data. The use of electronic systems to enable more efficient processing is widespread though not uniform. According to a recent study of 7 LEAs in England;

*“All but one of the primary schools and all the secondary schools visited used some form of electronic system to process their attendance data. The means of inputting data varied: six of the primary and three of the secondary schools transferred information manually from registers; others made use of optical mark recognition (OMR) sheets and four secondary schools employed a complete electronic package. Two secondary schools were planning to upgrade their systems either this year or next, but all the schools were able to generate class and individual statistics for pupil reports, reward schemes and identification of poor attendees”.*¹¹⁸

One key component of electronic data collection systems that is used in the UK and the US education systems is OMR technology. According to DRS (Data and Research Services) in the United Kingdom, it’s “Optical Mark Recognition [OMR] technology is being used in the education sector throughout the world for a vast range of applications including attendance, registration, surveys, examination marking and processing”.¹¹⁹ OMR scanners store data directly onto a database and allowing easy record-keeping, tracking and monitoring as well as accessibility to a range of readily available data for purposes of analysis. “Registers also show other vital information such as withdrawn, transferred and completed students”.¹²⁰

After registration, other systems need to be in place to track and monitor absenteeism. Following up on absences requires a post-registration system of tracking and monitoring. In the 7 LEAs study,

¹¹⁸ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹¹⁹ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹²⁰ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

*“Schools varied in the way they followed up absences. Twenty-one of the 27 schools from all the LEAs made ‘first day calls’; 14 called the homes of all absent pupils and seven targeted those of the most persistent absentees. Seventeen of the schools, six primary and eleven secondary, had dedicated staff such as attendance officers, learning mentors, home-school liaison teachers and school-based EWOs to help with attendance issues. Schools with dedicated support staff tended to make first day calls. However, a large secondary school in LEA 1 was considering the use of a commercial company to undertake first day calling because existing staff felt they could not cope with the volume of absences. Twelve of the 14 secondary schools operated a first day calling system, compared to only nine of the primary schools”.*¹²¹

A move towards electronic systems of data collection is often undertaken with the aim of making information gathering more efficient and increasing the reliability of systems of data collection. A 2006 study on electronic registration systems in England was meant to evaluate, among other things, the effectiveness of technology in monitoring absences. The CEDAR study¹²² was conducted with around 460 schools (for the survey) and 46 schools (for more in-depth case studies).

Some of the findings that emerged from the study were:

- Nine out of ten schools considered that e-registration provided useful information on authorised and unauthorised absence.
- Only a third of schools considered released teaching staff for other work and in less than a third this occurred for admin staff.
- Three quarters of schools considered their e-registration system to be reliable, but almost a quarter disagreed.
- E-registration was seen as adequate for the school’s needs, easy to use to provide useful information to staff and parents, and helped to manage absence more effectively by between 8 and 9 out of 10 schools.
- However, fewer than half of schools considered their e-registration provided easy comparison with other data, mainly because of problems in achieving system compatibility.
- Half of schools believed that the accurate recording provided by e-registration led to an increase in recorded absence.
- Seven out of 10 schools would recommend e-registration to other schools.
- Two thirds considered it good value for money.

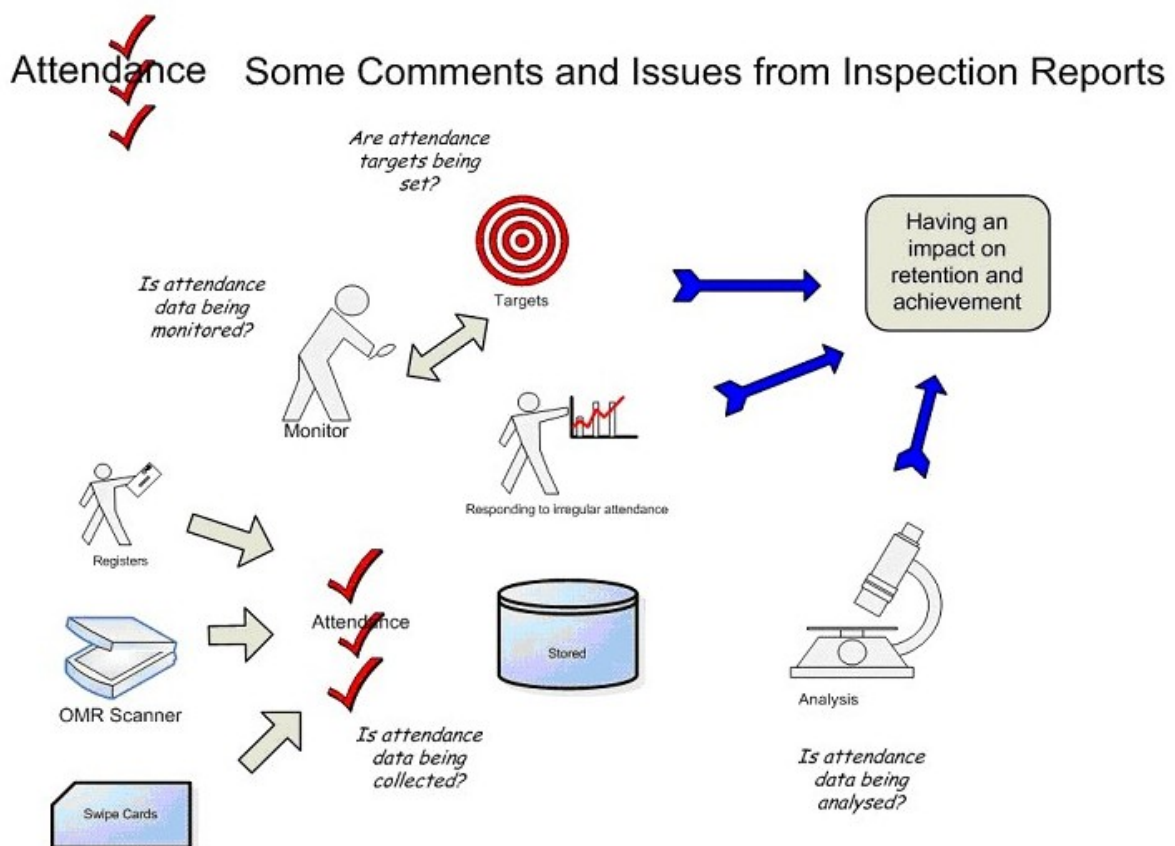
These findings might indicate a few considerations – that while the implementation of electronic systems does provide important efficiencies, it also come with its own challenges.

¹²¹ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹²² Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

Clearly technologies are useful in monitoring the problem of absenteeism but it must be borne in mind that the ultimate objective is to reduce absenteeism, and that this requires a holistic approach.

Other literature, from the United States, also reveals the importance of a holistic approach to data collection, which sees the efficient collection of data not as an end in itself, but as informing broader educational objectives (such as necessary measurements of the relationship between attendance and achievement for instance). Therefore, demonstrable educational improvement, within a school, district, province or country requires that the trends associated with attendance be monitored.



The CEDAR study emphasizes that “electronic registration is “one part of a strategy” to improve attendance. The majority of the staff viewed electronic registration as a device that enables schools to gather attendance information more easily and quickly, although it was argued that “the system alone will not reduce absenteeism”.¹²³ Among the most favoured systems to deal with absenteeism in 2005 (rated effective or highly effective) were:

- analysis of data to highlight levels and patterns of non-attendance (98%);

- contacting parents on the first day of absence (95%);
- incentive schemes and celebration of good attendance (90%);
- awareness raising of attendance and timekeeping issues (83%);
- attendance officer (80%); school-based welfare officer (75%);
- learning mentor (75%); and
- targets to reduce unauthorised absence (70%);

3.6.3 The importance of NGOs which assist state education departments (in monitoring and tracking absenteeism)

In both the UK and the US, there are numerous non-state agencies that provide schools with support in tracking and monitoring attendance. In the US for instance, there is the National Centre for School Engagement (NCSE) ¹²⁴, which strives to build a network of key stakeholders “who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success”. ¹²⁵ The NCSE “partners with school districts, law enforcement agencies, courts, and state and federal agencies to support youth and their families to be engaged at school. Services include training and technical assistance, research and evaluation, and information and resources”. ¹²⁶

Below is an example of a school self-assessment tool that the NCSE designed in a community forum to determine progress and performance in the 3 areas of school engagement. According to the NCSE, “Self-assessment models used by education systems and organizations are being reviewed in an effort to structure an instrument that is compatible with reporting and accountability requirements of schools”. ¹²⁷

¹²³ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹²⁴ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹²⁵ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹²⁶ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹²⁷ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

APPENDIX B

NCSE Summit for Leaders in School Engagement
Community Forum: Indicators of School Engagement

Table # _____

<i>Areas of School Engagement</i>	<i>Individual Report Card Form Triple A Schools – Self Assessment Tool</i>		
	<i>Primary Subcategories Top 3</i>	<i>Examples of Excellence in Subcategories, includes Strategies and Practices</i>	<i>Indicators of Success</i>
ATTENDANCE			
ATTACHMENT			
ACHIEVEMENT			

Names: _____

Please turn in your notes at the end of the session. It will help us in further identifying indicators of Triple A Schools.

Questions:

1. What are the primary subcategories of the areas of school engagement?
2. What would excellence in each of the subcategories look like? Please be specific.
3. How would you track the success of the strategies and practices to engage students and families? What means of assessment would you recommend?

What rating system would you use? Please check your top choice, or write in an alternative.

_____ Low Performing to High Performing

_____ Letter Scale - A to F

_____ Poor to Excellent

_____ Unsatisfactory/Satisfactory

_____ Number Scale – 1 to 5

Other: _____

In the US, “The No Child Left Behind Act holds states accountable for reporting attendance”.

¹²⁸ Tracking absenteeism/ attendance is not an easy or straightforward task, even with the implementation of technology: “there are a variety of reasons why attendance data are often misleading...The most daunting challenge is consistency. Attendance tracking is wildly inconsistent, often between classrooms, schools, and districts”. While technological enhancements to data collection systems have their benefits, these enhancements must still necessarily be accompanied by other considerations:

¹²⁸ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

“Some view software programs as the key to successful attendance tracking. There are numerous data tracking programs which are helpful aids, such as SASI, StarBase or StarStudent, Campus, STI, and many more. The greatest benefit in using these databases is seen when there is alignment among districts within a state.

Consistency in reporting can be improved if all districts use the same database. Of course, the data are only as good as what is entered. Coding systems, attendance definitions, and personnel practices may still vary widely.”

The National Centre for School Enhancement (NCSE) provides the following list of challenges and solutions that may be experienced when tracking attendance:¹²⁹

Table 1: Challenges and Solutions to Attendance Tracking

Challenges	Solutions
Teacher inconsistencies in reporting attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation by principals including consequences of non-compliance. • Clear school policies. • Create a serious school culture of tracking attendance. • Evaluate teachers on attendance tracking practices. • Attendance tracking training for substitute teachers.
Inflating absences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacing tardy status with wrongful absence reporting at the end of class. • Encourage other staff (counselors, etc) who meet with students to be responsible for those students' attendance data.
Inconsistent/Incorrect coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well defined absence codes, i.e., defining how many tardies or period absences = a daily absence. • Eliminate using a single period absence as an indicator of daily absences. • Period tracking (e.g., track in every class or 2 + times a day in elementary). • Enter all absences as unexcused until there is evidence of a legitimate excuse. • Use software that allows for easy updates/corrections of attendance data.
Meaningless Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminating unverified and “unknown” codes
Incorrect codes on chronic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate follow-up with truants.

¹²⁹ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

<p>truants/drop-outs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate transfer or drop-out status “assumptions” – insist on evidence of attendance at the transferred school. • Create a common student number that identifies the student regardless of transfer status. • Employ dedicated staff to address truancy, such as truancy officers and community advocates. • Eliminate automated parental notification processes – personalize the process via phone and home visits. • Provide attendance data on report cards. • Encourage personal relationships between parents and teachers, such that teachers follow-up with parents when a student is missing.
<p>Inconsistencies between schools and districts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement district-wide and state-wide tracking and reporting policies. • Provide incentives to schools. • Use common database systems.

The statistics analysed by the NCSE includes data such as the ‘Average Excused vs Unexcused Absences’ over three years, as well as average unexcused absences by Gender and by Grade.¹³⁰ While it carries out focus groups and interviews with parents and students for its studies on absenteeism, the NCSE also obtains secondary data from the district authorities. For instance, Denver Public School (DPS) data on absenteeism (excused and unexcused absences) is provided by DPS’s Department of Technology Services (DoTS).¹³¹ One of the objectives of DoTS is to “provide seamless automated business systems to support school and administrative functions”, as well as to “eliminate duplication of technology-supported and manual data collection processes”.¹³² In the US then, there is data collection at school, district and county level.

The Student Attendance Initiative (SAI) was initiated in Multnomah County in 1998, to address the problem of unauthorized absence, or truancy. “Schools, community service agencies, and juvenile justice authorities coming together to address truancy”, assisting families and students to “re-establish patterns of good attendance”.¹³³ The SAI initiative involves dedicated SAI staff who attend particularly to students (and their families) who are experiencing difficulties with attendance.

“Each week the school receives a printout of all students who have missed three or more days of school in the previous week. Principals select students from this list for a referral to the SAI program. Upon referral, the principal sends a letter home, notifying the family of the referral to SAI.”

¹³⁰ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹³¹ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹³² Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹³³ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

Once the referral has been made, SAI outreach staff members make a home visit or telephone the home to find out the reasons for nonattendance, and offer services and referrals to other programs to help families address the barriers to attendance”¹³⁴

The monitoring and tracking of learners each week enables this initiative to be successful.

One system used in the United States to monitor and track attendance, is the ‘Attendance Audit’, which districts request from ESDs (Education Service District).

“The audit is an independent, objective, research-based system in which an expert team from the ESD [Education Service District] visits the school, interviews staff and students, and documents and evaluates current attendance policies and practices to determine why students are absent from school, and what can be done to increase attendance. School audits are strictly voluntary—the district contacts the ESD if they want an audit”.¹³⁵

Attendance audits are becoming increasingly popular in the US as a way of helping districts increase attendance, but importantly, it is not implemented as a once-off strategy that is meant to ‘remove’ the problem of absenteeism. For instance, with the Linn Benton Lincoln (LBL) Education Service District (ESD) in Oregon, the attendance audit that they have designed which is “based on years of best practices research to help their district schools increase student attendance” is importantly, “combined with follow-up services for students in need, such as attendance officers¹³⁶, family liaisons, and social workers”.

3.7 Monitoring learner absenteeism in South Africa: Policy directions

As the international experiences summarised above indicate, monitoring provides insight into the trends and patterns associated with learner absenteeism. It involves the collection of information and data in various ways and with different technologies that can be used to develop corrective measures aimed at reducing learner absenteeism rates.

The South African Department of Education is committed to monitoring and evaluating the development of learners, and for this purpose the following monitoring measures have been stipulated by the Department:

1. **Learner Profile:** A Learner Profile is meant to accompany learners throughout their schooling careers. The Government’s Assessment Policy in the General Education

¹³⁴ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹³⁵ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

¹³⁶ Tasmanian Government Publications 2002

and Training Band, grades r to 9 (and ABET) sees the building of a learner profile as a “partnership between educators, learners, parents and education support services (ESS) such as occupational and speech therapists and educational psychologists.”¹³⁷

The government requires cumulative reporting on learners which includes attendance/ absenteeism trends: “The report shall...allow for comment on the personal and social development and the attendance of the learner at learning sites.”¹³⁸ One of the aims of reporting on learners is to “enhance accountability at all levels of the system.”¹³⁹

2. Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS) and South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS): “The Department, in its mission to improve the quality of education information, has initiated the Learner Unit Record Information & Tracking System (LURITS), which is intended to collect atomic (individual) learner information. This level of information collection will result in a national database of all learners in South Africa.

Furthermore, the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS), is currently being rolled out to schools at no fee. This computerised application will assist schools with the management and administration of school record keeping functions.”¹⁴⁰

Moseki (2004) mentions that all schools in South Africa are required to record the attendance of learners in class registers on a daily basis, and that schools are at liberty to devise additional measures for keeping and monitoring attendance records (such as tracking absence through “spot checks”).¹⁴¹

3.7.1 Data collection

Collecting information and data on different areas within education systems has become one of the primary concerns of Ministries of Education the world over. According to the

¹³⁷ Government Gazette, Vol. 402, no. 19640, 23 December 1998, Regulation gazette, no. 6397, No. Regulation 1718, Government Notice, “Department of Education, National Education Policy Act” (Act no. 27 of 1996), *Assessment Policy in the General Education and Training Band, Grades r to 9 and ABET*

¹³⁸ *Ibid*

¹³⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁰ Hindle, D. B. (Director General: Department of Education), “Education Statistics in South Africa at a glance in 2005, Education Management Information Systems (EMIS)”, published November 2006, accessed January 23, 2007, p 4, in (<http://www.education.gov.za/emis/emisweb/05stats/DoE%20Stat%20at%20a%20Glance%202005.pdf>)

¹⁴¹ Moseki (2004) p3

Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), there is a need for “relevant, accurate and timely information and data” to enable the provision of better quality education. ADEA thus established the Working Group on Education Statistics (WGES) in 1989, which has assisted African countries to develop and implement educational statistical information systems to provide decision-makers with meaningful, up-to-date information thus improving “policy-making, planning and monitoring for educational development.”¹⁴²

3.7.2 Education Management Information Systems (EMIS)

The implementation of Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) by Education Ministries has been a central way of monitoring and evaluating the state of education in the country. According to Hua and Herstein (2003), “successful management of today’s education systems requires effective policy-making and system monitoring through data and information” which has resulted in “countries around the world...[investing] significant resources into collecting, processing, and managing more and better data through education management information systems (EMIS)”¹⁴³. The functions of an effective EMIS are¹⁴⁴:

- Policy development
- Decision making in the broadest sense
- Planning
- Management
- Monitoring of system change
- Evaluation of policy implementation and service delivery

The South African Government sees its implementation of EMIS as part of its constitutional and legislative responsibility and as a means through which “to improve efficiency and optimise resource allocation”¹⁴⁵ in the education sector.

The Mandate of the Directorate is the development and elaboration of a national Education Management Information System (EMIS) with responsibilities¹⁴⁶ that include, inter alia;

¹⁴² “ADEA Working Group on Education Statistics (WGES)”, accessed January 23, 2007 in (http://nesis.intoweb.co.za/en/index.php?module=pagemaster&PAGE_user_op=view_page&PAGE_id=9&MMN_position=38:38)

¹⁴³ Hua, H. and Herstein, J. (2003) *Education Management Information Systems (EMIS): Integrated data and information systems and their implications in educational management*, paper presented at the “Annual Conference of Comparative and International Education Society”, New Orleans, LA, USA, March 2003

¹⁴⁴ Mckay, E and Heard, W. (2004) *Education Management Systems in the era of HIV/ AIDS: an introduction*, “Mobile Task Team (MTT) on the impact of HIV/ AIDS on education”, p6

¹⁴⁵ Department of Education, EMIS Home, accessed January 23, 2007, <http://www.education.gov.za/emis/emisweb/home.htm>

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*

ensuring that education data and information (on learners, staff, institutions, facilities and resources) relevant to education planning is collected, analysed, and reported using the EMIS. It is important to note that the EMIS system does not presently collect data on learner absenteeism.

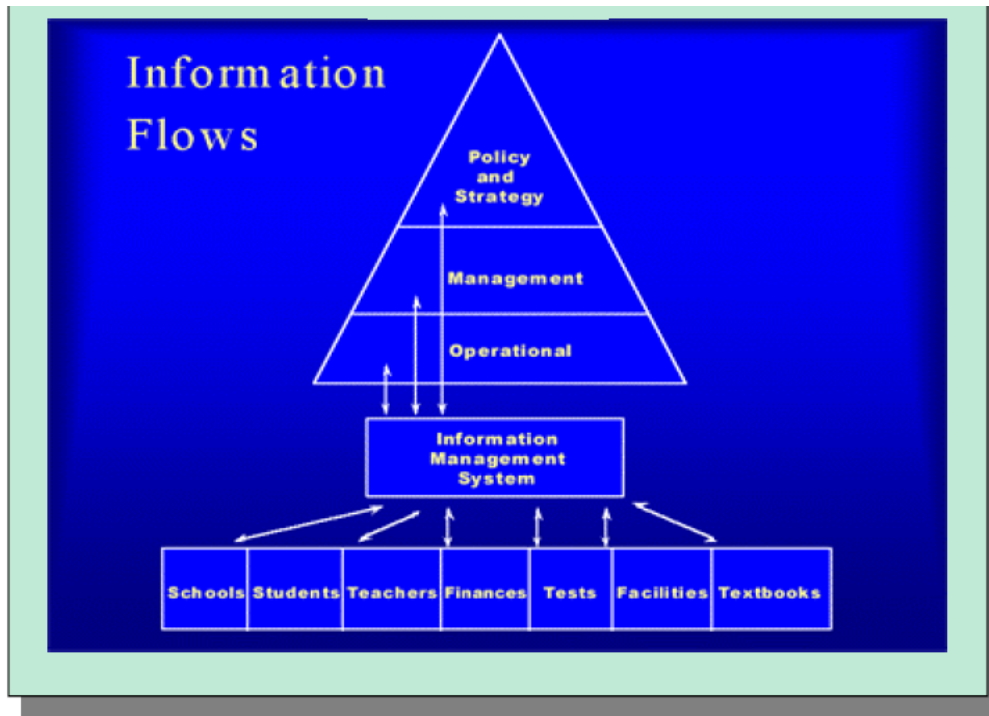
3.7.3 Some qualifications in the implementation of EMIS

Learner absenteeism is just one problem in a broader South African education system. However, the degree of success of M&E systems in the education sector will affect the monitoring of learner absenteeism. Below is some discussion around factors that have hindered the effective implementation of EMIS, particularly in developing countries:

- *Information as an end in itself*

Information is crucial to monitoring and evaluating educational phenomena such as learner absenteeism. The diagram below¹⁴⁷ illustrates information flow in educational management information systems. What is significant is the fact that information is meant ultimately to influence policy-making.

¹⁴⁷ Moses, K. (2000) (Vice President, Academy for Educational Development), *Information Systems for Education Management*, May/June "TechKnowLogia, Knowledge Enterprise Inc." www.TechKnowLogia.org, accessed January 24, 2007 http://www.techknowlogia.org/TKL_active_pages2/CurrentArticles/main.asp?IssueNumber=5&FileType=PDF&ArticleID=126, p50



However, information is not an end in itself, and must influence policy-making in order to be relevant (able to improve the quality of education). McKay and Heard highlight the fact that “data alone cannot improve [education system] quality (Levin, Windham and Bathory 1990:71)”¹⁴⁸, but is instead a starting point. An important function of information and monitoring systems is to be able to generate early warning signals of problem areas that require intervention.¹⁴⁹

- *IT (Information Technology) development as an end in itself*

Too many countries mistakenly emphasize technological development as an end in improving monitoring and evaluation within their education systems. IT development is only a start in managing the education system. Hua and Herstein caution that IT development is only one of the technical elements of a “larger information management capacity” and “will not automatically bring about healthy data flow, data sharing, information production, or information use for policy decisions”¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁸ McKay and Heard (2004) p10

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁰ Hua and Herstein (2003) p7

In South Africa, the focus still seems to be on universalizing ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) as a first step to improving M&E systems. The government is trying to enable e-administration to filter down to sub-national levels.¹⁵¹

- *Building trust for data and trust within the data-sharing system*

Trust is essential for an effective EMIS:

1. To be trusted, data must be *timely* and *reliable*, rather than obsolete.
2. Trust is crucial between different management levels in the system so that data can be integrated within the system. “Without coordinated management, there cannot be a monitoring and evaluation system, a planning and policy analysis system, or an EMIS system that is effective and policy-relevant”¹⁵².
3. Only trustworthy data that is accessible at all levels within the system is likely to impact on *decision-making*.¹⁵³ Hua and Herstein assert the necessity of “an institutional culture of making policy decisions based on data and information”¹⁵⁴. This is however, largely a capacity issue because the institutional demand for data use is affected by the “capacity of the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, Policy Research and Analysis Unit, and Budgeting and Planning Unit within the Ministry. A weak capacity in any of these management units would exert a negative impact on EMIS development”.¹⁵⁵

- *Coordinated management*

The structure of management in the education sector is crucial to a successful EMIS. Clear organizational structure means clear understanding of responsibilities, and greater accountability for monitoring and evaluation:

1. Organizations with unclear lines of accountability, with redundant or nonexistent responsibility assignments, and with poor coordination and leadership hinder EMIS development
2. Failing to establish an organization that holds staff accountable may result in an inefficient structure composed of loosely-affiliated units with different goals

¹⁵¹ Asmal, K. ‘Transforming Learning and Teaching through ICT’, Department of Education Draft White Paper on e-Education, August 2003, pp 25-26

¹⁵² Hua and Herstein (2003) p

¹⁵³ Hua and Herstein (2003) p5

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*

and missions, poor or no collaboration or communication, and general inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

3. Furthermore, lack of clearly defined responsibilities for staff may result in certain functions being overlooked or neglected, while at the same time other functions are performed by multiple individuals or units...Redundancy in responsibility, either de facto or by design, results not only in inefficiency, but also in the lack of legitimacy, as no single office is viewed as the authority.¹⁵⁶

Ensuring coordinated management, building trust in a data sharing system and having a realistic view of IT, are important for the South African context. The national Department of Education has taken steps to ensure greater integration between the provincial education departments and the national department, as well as between provincial departments themselves¹⁵⁷:

- The ministry established the Education Departments Support Unit (EDSU) within the national department
- The District Development Project was initiated to develop new organizational models, and to improve administrative and professional services at the district level, where the education system interfaces directly with learning sites
- An Education Management and Governance Development (EMGD) scheme was designed to establish an inter-provincial network for staff and governance development programmes
- The 2000 Tirisano ('Working Together') Plan, which calls for "massive social mobilization of parents, learners, educators, community leaders, NGOs, the private sector and the international Community all motivated by a shared vision."¹⁵⁸

However, there are problems that still need to be addressed. Integration within and between provincial education departments is a problem. According to Taylor; "...Provincial Departments of Education are much larger and more complex than the National Department."¹⁵⁹ Provincial departments of education struggle with "organizational, financial and service delivery limitations."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Hua and Herstein (2003) p20

¹⁵⁷ Taylor (2001) p36

¹⁵⁸ Taylor (2001) p39

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, A. (2001) *Governance and Management of Education in post-Apartheid South Africa*, paper presented at the "Conference for Organization of Ministries of Education, International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)", 20-21 June 2001

¹⁶⁰ Taylor (2001) p40

Government education structures below the provincial level (over which the provincial education departments have jurisdiction) are not always playing an effective role. The Human Rights Commission's 2006 'Report of the Public Hearing on the Right to Basic Education'¹⁶¹ states that "Many district offices and officials are not rendering adequate support at a local level."

The National and Provincial Departments of Education do, therefore, have policies and systems in place that could potentially play a role in monitoring learner absenteeism. Whether this potential can be realised would depend, inter alia, on the factors highlighted above and also on whether there would be the capacity at the different levels to use information relevant to attendance and absenteeism and the political will to deem this to be an important exercise amongst other competing priorities.

¹⁶¹ *Report of the Public Hearing on the Right to Basic Education*, "South African Human Rights Commission", accessed 25 January, 2007, pg 48, http://www.sahrc.org.za/sahrc_cms/downloads/RBE_Report.pdf

4. ABSENTEEISM: PREVALENCE, UNDERSTANDING AND METHODS TO ADDRESS ABSENTEEISM – FINDINGS FROM THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

This section of the report will deal with findings from the empirical investigation. It summarises response to questions addressed to school principals, SGB representatives, circuit managers and representatives of the PED head offices that were visited in each province.

4.1 Understanding and definition of absenteeism

At all the schools visited, principals and School Governing Body (SGB) representatives, defined absenteeism as non-attendance for an entire day. They employed the same definitions when capturing absenteeism data in school registers. Learners who only attend for part of the school day were considered present. In a few cases, learners were marked absent or present based on whether they attended the registration period (Guguletu Comprehensive in the Western Cape and the Hoër Tegniese Skool in Kimberley, Northern Cape and Southernwood Primary School in the Eastern Cape). Absenteeism records, which do not reflect truancy or absences for part of the day, are not an accurate reflection of attendance rates. The only notable exception was Pinetown Boys High School in KwaZulu-Natal which recorded attendance twice a day, once in the morning and in the afternoon. As a result, the school keeps records of full- and half-day absenteeism (thereby also keeping some record of truancy).

Based on the literature review and the definitions employed in the surveyed schools we have produced the following definition of learner absenteeism: A learner is considered absent when the learner is not at school for an entire day. This is also the definition currently employed by the vast majority of surveyed schools when capturing learner absenteeism/attendance data. Nevertheless, it would be useful to distinguish between partial absenteeism (absent for part of the day) and full absenteeism (absent for the entire day). Absenteeism (whether partial or full) can be authorised (by parents or schools) or unauthorised. Further, authorised absenteeism (by parents) can be legitimate (e.g. due to learner illness) or illegitimate (e.g. parent does not consider education important or engages the learner in child labour).

4.2 Absenteeism and drop out: understanding of the problem

An important finding of this study is that many of the interviewees did not consider “full” learner absenteeism (i.e. absence for an entire day) as a significant problem in their schools or areas of jurisdiction. Nevertheless, respondents highlighted partial absenteeism/truancy as a cause for concern and a prevalent problem, particularly in secondary schools. This excludes concerns raised pertaining to the widespread problem of late coming, which our fieldwork revealed is the consequence mainly of inadequate and ineffective transportation systems. In those cases where “full day” absenteeism was identified as a problem it was limited to certain schools or areas. For example, the provincial representative in KwaZulu-Natal argued that learner absenteeism was a problem particular to certain schools in the province and that these tended to be the schools that were “badly managed”. Circuit managers in Gauteng argued that learner absenteeism was a problem in Johannesburg West and particularly in Ekurhuleni South. Whilst circuit managers in the North West argued that educator absenteeism was a much bigger problem than learner absenteeism.

When asked about the period after which a learner is considered to have dropped out, various responses were provided. The most common period of continuous absence that qualifies a learner as having dropped out is ten days. It was also not clear whether these drop-outs were captured in absenteeism records or not. Table 2 below provides an indication of the period after which school principals define a learner as having dropped out.

Table 2: Definitions of drop-outs provided by school principals

School	Definition of a drop-out
King Shaka High School	After 14 days without reason
Pinetown Boys High	If grade 12 learner is absent for 35 days, no guidelines for other learners
Pella Primary School	No policy
Siyamu Junior Primary School	When parents confirm
Hlokoma High School	After ten consecutive days of absence without permission
Southernwood Primary	After ten consecutive days of absence without permission
Phillip Mtywaku Secondary School	After ten days of consecutive absence
Fanti Gaqa Senior Primary School	After ten days of consecutive absence
Flamingo Primary School	They do not consider any learner a drop-out unless informed by the Department of Education that this is the case
Radirile Intermediate School	There is not definition or policy in this regard
Hoer Tegniese Skool (Secondary school)	After parents have confirmed this status
Bokomose Secondary School	After ten consecutive days of absence without a known reason
Pietersburg Primary School	It has never happened, but there are transfers.

O.R. Mabotja Secondary School	After 10 days and appropriate consultation with parents
Lekazi Primary School	After 10 days and subject to an investigation
Lekazi Secondary School	After 10 days and subject to an investigation.
Malelane Primary School	After an investigation into the status of the learner.
Lwaleng Primary School	After two months
Gaetsho Secondary School	After 20 days of absence and consultation with parents.
Redibone Middle School	After consultation with the parents and the SGB representative.
Boiteko Primary School	After consultation with parents failed to generate a solution
Moroko High School	After ten consecutive days of absence from school without permission a learner is considered to have dropped out.
Kgauho Secondary School	If absence continues after parents have been contacted the learner is considered a drop-out.
Ditlatse Primary School	A learner is regarded as a drop-out after being absent for one quarter of the year.
Mannenber Primary	A learner is considered to have dropped-out after ten consecutive days of absence without reason.
Guguletu Comprehensive (a.k.a. Intshukumo Secondary)	Assessed on a case by case basis.
Milnerton High School	After an investigation has been completed and attempts have been made to talk to parents (i.e. after about one month of absence).
Greenside High	No drop-outs, just transfers
Tsakane Secondary School	After two weeks, but no actual policy
Empumalanga Primary School	No policy

4.3 Prevalence of absenteeism in some South African schools

School principals were asked to estimate the number of learners absent on an average day in their schools. All except two respondents were able to provide an estimate and when calculated as a proportion of the learners enrolled at the time of the interview, these estimates ranged between one and eight percent. Table 3 shows the estimated number and the approximate rate per school. The rate, shown in brackets in the second column, has been calculated by taking the number given and calculating it as a percentage of all learners enrolled at the particular school. It is an approximate rate.

Table 3: Estimates of absenteeism rates

School	How many learners are estimated (by principal) to be absent on an average day?
King Shaka High School	More than 50 (approximately 5 percent)
Pinetown Boys High	Less than 20 (approximately 2 percent)
Pella Primary School	Approximately 4 (approximately 3 percent)
Siyamu Junior Primary School	Less than 20 (approximately 3 percent)
Hlokoma High School	Less than 20 (approximately 2.7 percent)
Southernwood Primary	About five per day (approximately 1.4 percent)
Phillip Mtywaku Secondary School	Very negligible (but Principal could not provide an estimate).
Fanti Gaqa Senior Primary School	Less than 10 (less than 2 percent)
Flamingo Primary School	Less than 20 (approximately 1.8 percent)
Radirile Intermediate School	Between 20 and 50 (approximately 6 percent)
Hoer Tegniese Skool (Secondary school)	Between 20 and 50 (approximately 5 percent)
Bokomose Secondary School	Less than 20 (approximately 2.3 percent)
Pietersburg Primary School	Less than 20 (approximately 1.7 percent)
O.R. Mabotja Secondary School	Between 20 and 50 ¹⁶² (approximately 4.5 percent)
Lekazi Primary School	Less than 20 (approximately 1.6 percent)
Lekazi Secondary School	Between 20 and 50 (approximately 2.8 percent)
Malelane Primary School	Less than 20 (approximately 7 percent)
Lwaleng Primary School	Less than 20 (approximately 8 percent)
Gaetsho Secondary School	Between 20 and 50 (approximately 2.8 percent)
Redibone Middle School	Less than 20 (approximately 2 percent)
Boiteko Primary School	Less than 20 (approximately 4 percent)
Moroko High School	Less than 20 (approximately 3 percent)
Kgauho Secondary School	Between 15 and 20 (approximately 2 percent)
Ditlatse Primary School	2 to 5 (approximately 3 percent)
Mannenbergh Primary	Less than 20 (approximately 4 percent)
Guguletu Comprehensive (a.k.a. Intshukumo Secondary)	Between 20 and 50 (approximately 3.5 percent)
Milnerton High School	Less than 20 (approximately 2.2 percent)
Greenside High	Don't know
Tsakane Secondary School	Don't know
Empumalanga Primary School	Between 5 and 10 (approximately 1 percent)

¹⁶² The principal said that the majority of absentees are grade eight and grade nine learners

It would seem that the average absenteeism rate is approximately four percent, which corresponds reasonably well to the figures extracted from the school registers for the two days in February (see Table 4). In six schools the absentee figures requested were not available at the time of the interview and were not supplied subsequent to the interview. It stands to reason, however, that because partial absenteeism is not recorded, the absenteeism figures provided may be an underestimate of the prevalence of absenteeism in South Africa.

Table 4: Daily absenteeism on 6 and 9 February 2007

School	Total number of learners	Learners absent on Tuesday 6/2/07 (%)	Learners absent on Friday 9/2/07 (%)
King Shaka High School	994	Not available	Not available
Pinetown Boys High	850	23 (2.7)	9 (1)
Pella Primary School	136	65 (47.8)	60 (44)
Siyamu Junior Primary School	687	Not available	Not available
Hlokoma High School	725	Not available	Not available
Southernwood Primary	350	12 (3.4)	8 (2.3)
Phillip Mtywaku Secondary School	332	Not available	Not available
Fanti Gaqa Senior Primary School	922	2 (0.2)	4 (0.4)
Flamingo Primary School	1053	37 (3.5)	37 (3.5) ¹⁶³
Radirile Intermediate School	582	1 (0.1)	1 (0.1)
Hoer Tegnieste Skool	583	60 (10.3) ¹⁶⁴	60 (10.3)
Bokomose Secondary School	845	15 (1.7)	13 (1.5)
Pietersburg Primary School	1196	10 (0.8)	17 (1.4)
O.R. Mabotja Secondary School	784	14 (1.78)	25 (3.18)
Lekazi Primary School	1135	25 (2.2)	28 (2.46)
Lekazi Secondary School	1256	16 (1.27)	31 (2.46)
Malelane Primary School	533	4 (0.75)	9 (1.68)
Lwaleng Primary School	156	11 (7.0)	24 (15.38)
Gaetsho Secondary School	1254	12 (0.9)	29 (2.3)
Redibone Middle School	876	7 (0.79)	29 (3.3)
Boiteko Primary School	495	8 (1.6)	8 (1.6)
Moroko High School	697	1 (0.14)	5 (0.71)
Kgauho Secondary School	816	1 (0.12)	2 (0.24)
Ditlatse Primary School	72	5 (6.9)	0
Mannenbergh Primary	511	9 (1.76)	26 (5.08)
Guguletu Comprehensive (a.k.a. Intshukumo Secondary)	1025	49 (4.78)	95 (9.2)
Milnerton High School	885	20 (2.25)	60 (6.7)
Greenside High	940	15 (1.59)	24 (2.5)
Tsakane Secondary School	1571	Not available	Not available

¹⁶³ The absenteeism rates for this particular week were extremely high and having consulted the school's documents for the years and months preceding this week, it cannot be considered representative of absenteeism rates.

¹⁶⁴ The majority of the absentees were in grades 11 and 12, with the lower grades having close to 100 percent attendance on these days.

Empumalanga Primary School	698	Not available	Not available
----------------------------	-----	---------------	---------------

Additional information¹⁶⁵ on absenteeism obtained in the course of the interviews (taking account of the different approaches to recording and reporting) include the following observations:

- The average learner at King Shaka in KwaZulu-Natal was absent for 3.6 days in 2006¹⁶⁶
- The Pinetown Boys High attendance rate for 2006 was 89.2 percent¹⁶⁷
- According to the Eastern Cape EMIS office, absenteeism rates are between five and seven percent in the province¹⁶⁸
- At Moroko High School in the Free State the average learner would be absent for 2.6 days per quarter, with a 95.85 percent attendance rate in 2006¹⁶⁹
- At Kgauho in the Free State, there was a 97.8 percent attendance rate (i.e. absenteeism rate of 2.2 percent) in 2006¹⁷⁰
- At Ditlatse Primary (Farm) School there was as 91 percent attendance rate (i.e. absenteeism rate of 9%) 2006¹⁷¹

Unfortunately, aggregate information on absenteeism for 2006 as a whole, was not available from the schools visited. From the sample of schools visited and the information obtained, the absenteeism rate for the two days in February 2007 and for 2006 ranged from less than 0 to over 40 percent, with the majority of schools (19) reporting absenteeism of less than 6 percent. This applies to full day absenteeism.

The estimates of absenteeism provided by school principals did not vary greatly from the absenteeism recorded on the two days in February, nor was is very different from the average absenteeism rate recorded of five percent. Most respondents estimated absenteeism to be in the range of two to four percent with only three school principals estimating absenteeism to be between six and eight percent. Two of the three schools visited in Mpumalanga estimated absenteeism at seven to eight percent. Apart from these

¹⁶⁵ This information was obtained during the interviews and serves as additional observations only.

¹⁶⁶ Absenteeism rate calculated on the basis of school registers provided

¹⁶⁷ According to the principal of the school

¹⁶⁸ Reported by PED representative during the interview.

¹⁶⁹ Absenteeism rate calculated on the basis of school registers provided

¹⁷⁰ Absenteeism rate calculated on the basis of school registers provided

¹⁷¹ Absenteeism rate calculated on the basis of school registers provided

two schools there were no marked differences in estimated or recorded absence by province or type of school.

4.4 Reasons for absenteeism

This section is an account of the reasons identified by interviewees (i.e. school principals, representatives of SGB's, circuit managers and representatives of the PED's) for absenteeism in schools. The reasons are listed in the order of frequency in which they were mentioned. It should also be pointed out that interviewees often talked of full and partial absenteeism interchangeably so that many of these (particularly the transport issue) can be considered reasons for partial absenteeism, or late coming and not for absenteeism as defined in this study.

- **Poverty** (level of household-income): Although this was a factor that was mentioned 35 times, it is the factor that underpins most of the other reasons cited and discussed in this report. The level of household income also affects food insecurity and the lack of supervision at homes as parents take any employment opportunities that are available. Poverty may lead to the disintegration of family units as unemployed individuals turn to alcohol and drugs, learners spending time taking care of younger members of their families and of learners engaging in part-time employment in order to contribute to the socio-economic survival of their families.
- **Transport** (mentioned 27 times): In many areas (urban and rural) public transport is unavailable, unreliable or unaffordable (for the many impoverished learners). In other areas, particularly rural areas, roads are not passable. This is seen as a factor that contributes to late coming (in particular) and absenteeism.
- **Illness** among learners, educators and parents was also mentioned 27 times and this can probably be considered as the primary factor directly affecting absenteeism in the visited schools. Interestingly, there were only four references to the HIV/AIDS pandemic (in terms of its influence on absenteeism) and its impact was on educator mortality and the increased responsibilities of learners with infected parents.
- The other factor identified as having a high impact on learner absenteeism by the majority of the respondents (27) was the reported **lack of parental involvement** in the education and school activities of learners.
- **Food insecurity** (mentioned 18 times) was seen as a contributing factor to absenteeism in that learners were too hungry to come to school or that when they were at school they were too tired to concentrate or attend for an entire day. In

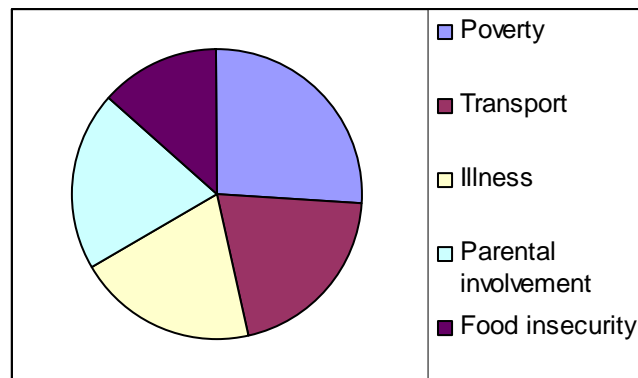
addition, food insecurity and inadequate nutrition contributes to low resistance to diseases among learners.

- **Disintegration of family units** was mentioned 16 times as a factor contributing to absenteeism. Issues included the inability of single-parent households to financially support or effectively monitor learners, the inability of parents to impose discipline on learners, the fragmented and disorganised lives of many learners, excessive responsibility of older learners to care for their younger siblings, the prevalence of child-headed households, alcoholism and drug abuse within families, excessive responsibility of learners to take care of older or disabled members of their families, and child abuse.
- **Drug abuse** and the easy availability of drugs was mentioned 15 times as a factor with a high impact on absenteeism (this was particularly relevant in Limpopo, and the Western Cape, but this is not necessarily an indication of provincial trends and more of the schools selected).
- Similarly **teenage pregnancy** and the requirements of teenage parenting was mentioned 15 times as a factor with a high impact on learner absenteeism.
- Ten interviewees listed **classroom overcrowding** as a factor with a high and negative impact on learner attendance rates.
- Ten interviewees argued that **violence and bullying** in schools was a factor that impacted highly on levels of attendance. Four of these emphasised the impact of gang fights (which seems to have a particularly serious impact in the Western Cape).
- Nine interviewees argued that **lack of facilities** such as water, electricity and sanitation was a factor with a high and negative impact on learner attendance rates.
- Eight interviewees argued that absenteeism rates are higher on days on which **grants and pensions** are paid out as learners are required to accompany older members of their families on these days.
- Seven interviewees argued that the “**absence of appropriate disciplinary**” methods or policies was contributing to higher levels of absenteeism and proposed the reintroduction of corporal punishment or “at least the development of effective alternative punishments” as a solution.
- Inefficient **management** of schools coupled with a lack of management and leadership skills among principals and other relevant members of staff contributes to higher levels of absenteeism according to seven of the interviewees. The perception that absentee rates are lower in former Model C schools was cited as evidence of the importance of good management practices in ensuring good attendance rates. (Notably this was a factor that was mentioned only by circuit managers and provincial

representatives of the Department of Education and not by any School Governing Board representatives or school principals).

- Six interviewees pointed to **negative attitudes** among learners (aggravated by peer pressure) as a factor with a high impact on absenteeism. These attitudes ranged from perceived “typical teenage rebelliousness” to “extreme hopelessness among learners that they will ever secure employment”.
- **Poor academic performance** was mentioned five times as a factor with a high impact on learner absenteeism.
- Undefined **psychological problems** among learners were mentioned five times as a factor with a high and negative impact on learner attendance.
- Lack of **skill and commitment** among educators was mentioned five times as a factor with a high impact on learner absenteeism.
- Three interviewees argued that negative relationships between learners and educators had a high and negative impact on learner attendance levels.
- Two interviewees (one in KwaZulu-Natal and one in Limpopo) listed “traditional rites” for boys as a factor with a high impact on absenteeism, particularly for certain periods of the year.
- One interviewee argued that the absence of a policy to deal with learner absenteeism on a national level contributes to high levels of absenteeism, one argued that learners are more likely to be absent at the beginning of the year, and another that learners were more likely to be absent on a Friday. Other factors that were mentioned only once include the requirements of multi-grade teaching, alcohol abuse amongst learners over weekends, absenteeism is less likely in primary schools, lack of uniforms, English as the medium of instruction, forcing learners to take subjects that they are not interested in and the policy of automatic promotion based on age which arguably dissuades learners from “working hard”.

Chart A: Top Five Reasons for Absenteeism in South Africa



In addition, the following factors were identified as contributing to absenteeism by provincial representatives and circuit managers (or their equivalents in the provinces).

- The arguable “collapse” of management and reporting systems post 1994 and the failure to replace the policies and procedures.
- The general lack of finances and resources at schools makes it unlikely that any of the scarce resources will be spent on either recording or addressing absenteeism. Particularly since it is not considered a problem.
- There is a lack of feedback to those schools who do monitor and report on absenteeism and this discourages them from continuing with these activities.
- Neither the schools, nor the district offices, nor the provincial offices have the human resources required to allocate someone to deal with learner absenteeism (which is not really a priority).
- Many interviewees argued that schools do not have effective disciplinary measures to utilise since corporal punishment was disallowed.

The study thus highlighted a number of factors that contribute to absenteeism that are similar or identical to those discussed in international literature on absenteeism. These include the importance of parental involvement, disintegration of family units, drug abuse, bullying in schools, negative attitudes among learners, poor academic performance, undefined psychological problems, and negative relationships between learners and educators. The most significant reasons for absenteeism in South Africa are, however, socio-economic (see Chart A). These include poverty, transport, food insecurity, teenage pregnancy, classroom overcrowding, violence in schools, lack of facilities in schools, absence of policy and lack of management skills. It is interesting to note that there was no marked difference in the reasons cited as having an impact on attendance at the former Model C schools.

The main reasons for absenteeism in the schools visited would suggest that more comprehensive intervention strategies are required, one's that involve other government

departments in an integrated approach towards poverty alleviation and employment creation, particularly in rural areas.

4.5 Measures taken by schools to reduce absenteeism

This section reports on the measures taken at the various schools to curb absenteeism. The information is based primarily on the interviews with principals and SGB representatives. It should be noted that most of the responses were solicited in response to structured questionnaires and were not, therefore, unprompted (notably, references to nutrition programmes or feeding schemes, systems of merits and demerits, methods to honour learners for attendance, and providing access to sporting and extra-curricular activities). Furthermore, it was acknowledged in most cases that these measures probably contribute to higher attendance rates, but that they were not introduced for that purpose. Finally, most of the unprompted measures mentioned by interviewees were actually mentioned as methods to reduce partial absence and not absenteeism (as defined in this document).

Common measures initiated by schools to curb absenteeism include;

- Interviewees from 25 of the 30 schools visited felt that sporting and extra-curricular activities contributed to increased levels of attendance, but none had introduced these activities for the purpose of reducing absenteeism.
- In total, 20 of the 30 school principals argued that improved communication between parents and the school contributed to increased attendance rates and had therefore employed various measures to attain this improved level of communication. These ranged from social functions, to introducing diaries that have to be signed by parents on a daily basis, to calling parents, writing letters to parents and visiting learners' homes.
- Interviewees from 19 of the 30 schools had systems in place to honour learners with good attendance records.
- Interviewees from 16 of the 30 schools felt that school feeding/nutrition schemes were contributing to higher levels of attendance.
- Interviewees from 15 of the 30 schools visited emphasised the importance of active and committed School Government Boards in promoting levels of attendance.
- At only four schools principals reported that efforts were made to engage with learners who are frequently absent in an attempt to resolve any problems that they might have.

- Four schools reported having after-care centres, but none argued that this contributed to attendance levels.
- Interviewees from 2 of the 30 schools reported that they utilised punitive measures to discourage absenteeism (Moroko High School in the Free State and Pinetown Boys High in KwaZulu-Natal).
- At Malelane Primary School in Mpumalanga and Milnerton High in the Western Cape, interviewees emphasised the importance of good school management systems in curbing absenteeism.

Other methods include scheduling tests for Friday afternoons to encourage attendance (at Pinetown Boys High in KwaZulu-Natal), encouraging greater community involvement (e.g. Pella Primary School in KwaZulu-Natal where “loitering” children are “picked-up and brought to school” by community members, Siyamu Junior Primary School employed a school nurse to tend to sick children, Southern Wood Primary and Gaqa Primary in the Eastern Cape emphasised the creation of a school environment where children feel “happy, wanted and useful” and “enjoy attending school”, Gaqa Primary monitors educator attendance levels, Bokomose Secondary School in Limpopo formed a partnership with the local hospital in an attempt to reduce the prevalence of teenage pregnancies, and at Greenside High in Johannesburg emphasis is placed on the importance of academic achievement and at Milnerton High in the Western Cape efforts are made to ensure the safety of learners and additional teachers have been employed at the cost of parents.

It was also a finding of this study that with the exception of Milnerton High in the Western Cape and Gaetsho Secondary school in the North West, none of the schools had a guidance councillor. Milnerton High in the Western Cape employs a registered psychologist and has a permanent full-time guidance councillor, while Gaetsho Secondary School in the North West has a full-time guidance councillor. However, all the principals and SGB representatives interviewed argued that it would be beneficial for schools to have the services of a permanent guidance councillor. The positive impact would not primarily be on absenteeism, but it would presumably reduce absenteeism as a wider consequence of addressing the many social and psychological problems learners have to face. A number of schools did mention that in this regard they utilise the services of the Educational Support Services situated in the district offices, but that this was not sufficient (i.e. the need permanent staff dedicated to their schools).

As Table 5 indicates, most schools address absenteeism on a day-to-day basis by contacting parents or care-givers. This is in accordance with section five of the South African Schools Act, which compels the Head of Department to employ several measures if learners fail to

attend school, including the issuing of written notices to the parent/s of the learner where necessary.

Table 5: Policies and procedures to address systemic absenteeism

School	Policy and procedures to address systemic absenteeism
King Shaka High School	Parents are called after 3 days
Pinetown Boys High	Punishment of learners
Pella Primary School	No policy
Siyamu Junior Primary School	Parents are contacted
Hlokoma High School	Parents are contacted
Southernwood Primary	Parents are contacted
Phillip Mtywaku Secondary School	No policy
Fanti Gaqa Senior Primary School	Parents are contacted
Flamingo Primary School	Parents are contacted after 3 days of absence
Radirile Intermediate School	Parents are contacted after ten days. If necessary the ESS of the DoE are approached.
Hoer Tegnieste Skool	Parents are contacted
Bokomose Secondary School	Parents are contacted
Pietersburg Primary School	Parents are contacted
O.R. Mabotja Secondary School	Parents are contacted
Lekazi Primary School	Parents are contacted after 10 days
Lekazi Secondary School	Parents are contacted after 5 days of consecutive absence
Malelane Primary School	Parents are contacted after 3 consecutive days of absence
Lwaleng Primary School	Parents are contacted if possible
Gaetsho Secondary School	Parents are contacted.
Redibone Middle School	Parents are contacted if patterns emerged or there is unexplained consecutive absence.
Boiteko Primary School	Parents are contacted.
Moroko High School	Parents are called after five days of absence.
Kgauho Secondary School	Parents are contacted after four days of absence.
Ditlatse Primary School	Parents are contacted after (undefined) prolonged absences.
Mannenber Primary	After three days of absence without notification from parents or caregivers, a letter is sent to parents. If no response is received, further investigation is carried out and where necessary the support of the Department of Social Services or the police is sought.
Guguletu Comprehensive (a.k.a. Intshukumo Secondary)	Parents are contacted
Milnerton High School	Parents are contacted after ten days of absence or if a pattern of absenteeism is emerging.
Greenside High	Parents are contacted
Tsakane Secondary School	No policy
Empumalanga Primary School	No policy

4.6 Recommendations made by Circuit Managers and PED representatives to reduce absenteeism

Circuit managers and PED representatives were asked a number of questions about different ways in which learner absenteeism could be reduced. These questions addressed inter-departmental cooperation, support by district, provincial and the national offices of the Department of Education and the main challenges to be addressed. While there was clearly variation in the responses, the following were the most important themes to emerge:

- At each level (i.e. at each school, at each district office and at the provincial office) there should be an individual who is responsible for and dedicated to collecting, recording, analysing and utilising learner absenteeism statistics.
- Security at schools should be improved. Increased security at schools would be particularly relevant in reducing absenteeism in schools in the Western Cape, for example, where gang violence has a significant negative effect on attendance.
- Efforts should be made to increase the involvement of parents, representatives of the School Government Boards and the community in general in ensuring attendance and monitoring absenteeism and truancy.
- Extending free schooling to more learners will contribute to decreased levels of absenteeism.
- There is a need to design an efficient overall system for recording and monitoring learner absenteeism, and perhaps the electronic system and process of training that is accompanying the installation of the system at all schools in the Free State could serve as a best practice example.
- Improved facilities at schools will contribute to lower levels of absenteeism. This refers to facilities such as sports fields and equipment, but also to access to basic services such as water, electricity and working and clean toilets.
- Effort and resources should be allocated to training programmes and workshops aimed at developing management and administrative skills among the relevant members of staff at schools.
- Interventions designed specifically to address absenteeism should focus on those areas or schools where absenteeism (as opposed to truancy) has actually been identified as a problem.
- Any attempt to reduce absenteeism should take account of the fact that it is a symptom of a much broader socio-economic problem (i.e. it is the result of poverty,

lack of parental involvement, the disintegration of family structures and high levels of violence in South African society). Successful approaches will by definition have to be holistic, comprehensive and specific to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the area in which these approaches are applied.

4.7 Recommended role for the National Department of Education

In response to the question about the recommended role for the national Department, the following emerged:

- Draft clear overall policy for recording, monitoring and addressing learner absenteeism and ensure that this is communicated effectively to schools and district offices.
- Establish a dedicated unit or employ dedicated staff to deal with learner absenteeism.
- Invest in educational programmes and communication initiatives to highlight to parents the importance of their involvement in their children's education.
- Extend feeding schemes/ nutrition programmes to all schools situated in impoverished areas in South Africa (i.e. not just primary schools).
- Ensure that all schools have access to basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation.
- Improve cooperation with other government departments in order to address the wider socio-economic factors that influence absenteeism. For example, work effectively with the Department of Social Welfare to assist child-headed households, work effectively with the Department of Safety and Security to improve security at schools, or work effectively with the Department of Health in an effort to ensure that all school children have access to health services.
- Related to the point above, many interviewees pointed to the need to have permanent nurses at schools, or access for learners to mobile clinics and clinics, for treatment and educational purposes.
- Ensure that each school has access to at least one dedicated social worker.
- Employ more and better qualified educators to improve the services offered to learners, to reduce problems associated with educators that are not committed and reduce the ratio between learners and educators in schools.
- Provide transport assistance to schools and where these policies do exist ensure that they are applied efficiently. For example, circuit managers in the Eastern Cape said that 70 percent of the schools in the province that had applied for the Scholar

Transport Subsidy were still waiting for approval from the provincial department as a result of delays in the application process.

- Generally, allocate more financial resources to schools.
- Improve communication between the provincial and district offices of the Department of Education.
- Focus resources and research on addressing problems such as truancy and not absenteeism.

5. RECORD KEEPING AND SYSTEMS

An important focus of the study was the investigation of record keeping by schools and the exchange of information between schools, district offices and the PED head office. A number of questions addressed the form of record keeping and the nature of information exchange between different levels of the education system in the provinces. The responses received are analysed in this section of the report.

An important question addressed to school principals, circuit managers and PED representatives, is whether they have a formal or informal policy that guides schools and/or districts on how to record and monitor learner absenteeism. Twenty five of the thirty principals spoken to indicated that they do have a policy, although this was generally equated with the keeping of a register. PED representatives also indicated that there is a policy, with the exception of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. Four circuit managers – in Mpumalanga, North West, Free State and Gauteng indicated that there was no policy in place.

5.1 School registers, methods for recording and levels of absenteeism

Attendance and absentee records (i.e. number of days/learners absent and number of days/learners present) were in all cases kept per class and by grade and the data was disaggregated by gender, but not by race or home-language. Other information that is often recorded on these documents include the number of drop-outs and transfers (e.g. King Skaka and Siyamu Junior Primary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal) and educator attendance.

For the majority of the schools visited in all the provinces, learner attendance/ absenteeism information was recorded daily, aggregated weekly and reportedly submitted to the district office (which is required to forward the information to the provincial office) or directly to the Provincial Education Department on a quarterly basis. Exceptions include Guguletu Comprehensive School in the Western Cape which according to the principal does not submit quarterly reports to the Provincial Education Department, but nevertheless have their records examined by circuit managers during school visits. The Milnerton High School, also in the Western Cape, submits data electronically to the district office when requested to do so. The daily registers generally show how many learners were absent on a given day, whilst the quarterly reports show the number of absentee days.

The majority of schools utilised daily registers, weekly summary registers and quarterly reports. Approximately half the schools reported that they received the registers from the Department of Education. Registers are supplied to schools in the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and the North West. Some schools in the Free State, Gauteng and Limpopo indicated that they receive registers from the PED, but not all the schools. None of the schools in KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and the Western Cape reported receiving registers.

Two-thirds of the schools kept learner profiles, more than two-thirds kept records of withdrawals and almost all kept transfer cards. These findings are summarised in Tables 6, 7 and 8 (the detailed tables appear in Annexures 6 and 7).

Table 6: School record keeping

	Number of schools	%
Daily register	28	93.3
Summary register	25	83.3
Quarterly report	25	83.3
Period register	3	10
Other (eg. Snap surveys, period reports, biannual reports)	6	20

Table 7: Does the school receive the relevant documents from the Department of Education?

	Number of schools	%
Yes	14	47%
No	16	53%

Table 8: General record keeping for absenteeism

	Yes	%	No	%
Does school keep learner profiles?	20	66.6	10	33.3
Does the school keep records of withdrawals?	24	80	6	20
Does the school keep transfer cards?	27	90	3	10

5.2 Record keeping: Provincial breakdown

Record keeping per province is described in the following.

5.2.1 KwaZulu-Natal

Four schools were visited in KwaZulu-Natal, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.

- Three (of four) schools reported that they did not receive registers or other relevant documentation from the Provincial Education Department. However, information provided by provincial and district officials indicates that schools were expected to purchase registers from their budgets from service providers who have been provided with a common template for daily learner attendance registers.
- Two (of four) schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- All four schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- All four schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.2 Eastern Cape

Four schools were visited in the Eastern Cape, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- All schools reported that they did receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Education Department.
- Two (of four) schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- Three (of four) schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- Three (of four) schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.3 Northern Cape

Three schools were visited in the Northern Cape, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- Two (of three) schools reported that they did receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Education Department.
- All three schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- All three schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- All three schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.4 Limpopo

Three schools were visited in Limpopo, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- Two (of three) schools reported that they did receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Department of Education.
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- All three schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.5 Mpumalanga

Four schools were visited in Mpumalanga, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- All four schools reported that they did not receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Department of Education.
- Three (of four) schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- Three (of four) schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- All four schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.6 North West

Three schools were visited in the North West, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- All three schools reported that they did receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Department of Education.
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.7 Free State

Three schools were visited in the Free State, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- Two (of three) schools reported that they did receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Department of Education.
- One (of three) schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- All three schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.8 Western Cape

Three schools were visited in the Western Cape, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- All (three) schools reported that they did not receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Department of Education.
- All three schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- All three schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- All three schools reported that they kept transfer cards

5.2.9 Gauteng

Three schools were visited in Gauteng, of these;

- All schools utilised daily registers, summary registers and quarterly reports.
- Two (of three) schools reported that they did not receive registers and other relevant documentation from the Provincial Department of Education.
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept learner profiles
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept learner withdrawal records
- Two (of three) schools reported that they kept transfer cards

As is shown in the summary tables above and the descriptive summaries per province, there are no striking differences in the records kept by provinces. This is not shown in any of the tables or in the provincial reports and a larger number (10) do not keep learner profiles. Less than half the schools visited indicated that they receive relevant documents from the PED's. In most cases, this would refer to attendance registers.

5.3 Record Keeping: District offices and Schools

In a number of provinces, Circuit Managers indicated that there was no policy or procedure designed specifically to deal with learner absenteeism. The current system (which works in most cases) is that schools send quarterly reports¹⁷² to district offices. District offices only intervene in cases where exceptional problems are evident, but generally just forward the reports to the provincial office (usually the EMIS office). In addition, district officials visit schools and in approximately half of the researched cases investigate school registers. Circuit Managers and School principals agree that schools do not receive feedback from the district offices on the information they submit. The interviewees also agreed that schools do not receive support or resources from the district offices.

Interviewees (particularly circuit managers and provincial representatives) also pointed out that the information that they received from schools is not necessarily accurate. This was

¹⁷² The quarterly reports that are sent to the district and provincial offices show the total number of learners absent, the number of learners absent by grade, the number of learners absent by gender and the number of days lost. In addition, the following information is captured (1) The number of schools days in the term, (2) The number of days (if any) on which the school was closed, (3) The number of non-teaching days in the term, (4) The number of actual academic school days, (5) The total number of absent days by educators, (6) The average attendance for the term,, (7) The total number of attendees, (8) The total possible number of attendees, (9) The average number of posts utilised for the terms, (10) The number of educator days gained through substitutions at the school's cost, (12) The Number of educator days gained through substitutions at departmental costs.

partly the result of the lack of capacity at district level to monitor absenteeism, to check compliance or to analyse data.

Circuit managers (and other interviewees) also emphasised the lack of inter-departmental cooperation in monitoring and more specifically addressing learner absenteeism. In most cases, there was minimal interaction with the Departments of Health, Social Welfare and in a few cases Safety and Security. Nevertheless, interviewees emphasised the important role increase inter-departmental cooperation could have on reducing levels of absenteeism.

5.4 Record Keeping: Provincial Offices

What emerged from interviews with representatives of the provincial offices is that while most of the provinces do receive information on learner absenteeism from the district offices, there is a lack of a common approach in analysing and reporting on these figures. There is also no common approach or policy to guide interventions by the PED's in attempting to deal with learner absenteeism.

Provinces that do have reporting systems that are used at the provincial level include the Free State, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga where annual reports are compiled that include information on learner absenteeism. In Gauteng and the Western Cape, there are departmental officials who interact with schools to verify figures on absenteeism and who attempt to reduce absenteeism. In most of the other provinces, there would appear to be little analysis of the information and no reporting. In many cases, there is also a lack of feedback to districts and limited support and/or communication between districts and schools regarding learner absenteeism. The following provides a summary of record keeping and related practices per province.

5.4.1 Free State

The Free State Provincial Department of Education (EMIS office) has a functioning, efficient and standardized reporting procedure. This system consists of quarterly survey records that are received from all schools in the province via the district offices. The survey contains information pertaining to learner and educator absenteeism and is disaggregated by class and gender. The information that is sent to the provincial office is published and a report is written by an official in senior management. In cases where absenteeism rates are excessively high, district offices are expected to take action.

The shortcoming of this system (according to our interviewee) is that there is no guarantee that any of the data received by the provincial department is accurate. Furthermore, there are no measures in place at the provincial office to ensure that information is reliable. There are also no official strategies designed to reduce absenteeism. There are no members of staff at the provincial level dedicated to dealing with absenteeism.

5.4.2 Gauteng

The Gauteng Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district offices. The interviewees said that schools have been advised to record learner attendance on a daily basis (which is the case) and to disaggregate the data by sex and population group. (None of the schools we visited disaggregated data by population group or race, nor do the standard format quarterly reports require such disaggregation). In an effort to ensure that data is reliable, Institutional Development Officials reportedly visit schools on a regular basis, and there are reportedly regular meetings between district and provincial representatives. Nevertheless, there are no specific strategies in place to deal with learner absenteeism.

5.4.3 Northern Cape

The North West Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district offices. Schools in the province have reportedly been given guidelines on how to record absenteeism. These include recording the number of learners absent, the frequency of absenteeism of particular learners, and the disaggregation of the data by sex. This information is, however, not analysed due to a lack of capacity to do so within the department. Similarly, there are no staff members dedicated specifically to addressing learner absenteeism.

5.4.4 Eastern Cape

The Eastern Cape Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district offices. The interviewee pointed out, however, that the data is probably unreliable and that only 86 percent of the schools in the province actually submit the required information to the district offices. As in the other provinces the submitted information is disaggregated by sex and by grade. The information is analysed annually and a report is written. The report is, reportedly, never used.

5.4.5 KwaZulu-Natal

The KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district offices. The interviewee pointed out, however, that the return rate of quarterly reports from schools is very low and that many “schools did not understand what was expected of them”. The interviewee again highlighted the unreliability of data and, accordingly the futility of analysing this data and utilising it to inform policy.

5.4.6 Limpopo

The Limpopo Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district office. Schools have been advised on how to record learner attendance. Records must include (1) the number of learners absent (2) the frequency of absences of particular learners and (3) disaggregate data by sex and population group. Overall, the provincial office does not have any official strategies to deal with learner absenteeism and there are no members of staff dedicated to the issue of absenteeism.

5.4.7 Mpumalanga

The Mpumalanga Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district office. Apart from the expectation that schools complete daily registers, summary reports and quarterly reports there are no other guidelines or policy directives pertaining to learner absenteeism according to the interviewee. It is a requirement of the recording system that data is disaggregated by grade and by gender. The registers record (1) the number of learners absent, and (2) the duration of absence. The information is analyzed at the provincial office on an annual basis. In extreme cases (i.e. very high levels of absenteeism) district offices are required to intervene. There are reportedly no strategies to directly address or monitor absenteeism and there are no members of staff dedicated to absenteeism.

5.4.8 North West

The North West Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district office. Schools are advised on how to record absenteeism. This includes disaggregating data by sex and grade. The interviewee reported that there are no

policies or strategies in place to deal specifically with learner absenteeism and that there are no members of staff dedicated to the issue of absenteeism.

5.4.9 Western Cape

The Western Cape Provincial Department of education subscribes to the same policy (which by default serves to monitor learner absenteeism) and thus also received quarterly reports from all schools via the district office. Data is disaggregated by class, grade and gender. In addition the province had introduced the Learner Support Officers Project which has reportedly been very successful in reducing absenteeism, and a special tracking system CEMIS in which the Safe School Centre is contacted on a 0800 number if learners are spotted outside of school. In an effort to ensure that data is accurate and reliable, circuit managers investigate attendance registers during their school visits. The information/ data generated is not analysed at provincial level.

6. KEY FINDINGS

The study was somewhat exploratory in nature and the findings that follow should be viewed in this context. A large literature was reviewed which provided information on the understanding of learner absenteeism internationally and locally and the ways in which it is monitored in a number of countries. This literature review will not be summarised here, instead the following concentrates of the key findings from the fieldwork that was carried out as part of this project.

1. Learner absenteeism (defined as a learner being absent for a full day) is not experienced as a major problem for the majority of respondents in schools, districts and PED head offices. However, the same interviewees noted that the frequency of partial (unauthorised and authorised) absences (including coming late) was a problem that needed to be addressed.
2. The approximate absenteeism rate in the schools visited is in the region of five percent. This is likely to be an underestimate because partial absenteeism is not recorded in South African schools.
3. There is a lack of a common understanding of, or policy approach to record, monitor or address drop-outs. The literature review we conducted indicated that the pressures leading to permanent drop-outs are similar to the pressures leading to more temporary absenteeism from school, and that there is probably a continuum of behaviour from temporary absences, through absenteeism, grade repetition and dropping out.¹⁷³ Methods designed to reduce absenteeism may, therefore, also contribute to a reduction in drop-out rates in South African schools.
4. Reasons for absenteeism include (in order of frequency) poverty, inadequate transport systems, illness, lack of parental involvement, food insecurity, disintegration of family units, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, classroom overcrowding, violence and bullying at schools, lack of basic services at schools, grant distribution days, inefficient management, negative attitudes among learners, poor academic performance, undefined psychological problems, lack of skill and commitment among educators, and negative relationships between learners and educators.
5. Reasons identified as contributing to absenteeism by provincial representatives and circuit managers include the lack of policies and procedures, the lack of human resources and finances at schools, the lack of feedback from district offices to schools and the absence of effective disciplinary measures.

¹⁷³ Wittenberg M 2005

6. Measures taken to reduce absenteeism include introducing sporting and extra-curricular activities, improved communication with parents, honouring learners for good attendance, nutrition/feeding schemes at schools, encouraging active and involved School Government Boards, counselling, punitive measures and good school management systems. Although there are no clear policies and procedures the visited schools deal with absenteeism by contacting parents or caregivers.
7. Only two of the 30 schools employed a guidance counsellor despite the general agreement of the importance of such a position at schools.
8. Attendance and absentee records (i.e. number of days/learners absent and number of days/learners present) were in all cases kept per class and by grade and the data was disaggregated by gender, but not by race or home-language.
9. For the majority of the visited schools in all the provinces learner attendance/ absenteeism information was recorded daily, aggregated weekly and reportedly submitted to the district office (which is required to forward the information to the provincial office) or directly to the provincial department of education on a quarterly basis.
10. The majority of schools utilised daily registers, weekly summary registers and quarterly reports. Approximately half the visited schools reported that they received the registers from the Department of Education and the other half copied old registers or devised their own registers. Two-thirds of the schools kept learner profiles, more than two-thirds kept records of withdrawals and almost all kept transfer cards.
11. There is no policy or procedure at the district offices designed specifically to investigate or address learner absenteeism.
12. Schools do not receive feedback from district offices on the information they submit except in very extreme cases.
13. Schools do not receive any support or resources from district offices that relate to learner absenteeism.
14. There are no measures in place to monitor or determine whether the information that is submitted to district offices is accurate.
15. There is a lack of inter-departmental cooperation pertaining to monitoring and more specifically cooperation aimed at addressing learner absenteeism.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Any attempt to reduce absenteeism should take account of the fact that it is generally a symptom of much broader socio-economic problems in South Africa. These problems include factors, such as; poverty, lack of parental involvement, the disintegration of family structures and high levels of violence in South African society. Reducing absenteeism can however be assisted by a number of measures that are within the control of the education department and that could be implemented at the school level.

Gathering improved information on the extent of learner absenteeism through monitoring will also assist in developing appropriate approaches that are based on information about the problem. Monitoring absenteeism should, however, start with a decision about the nature of the information system that will be used to gather information. Here the DOE has options. The SA-SAMS has been implemented in roughly 30% of schools and provides one option for providing an information system that could include the capturing of information on absenteeism. The EMIS system is broader in scope and more centralised in nature, but it does provide another option.

An effective information gathering and management system clearly requires capable individuals responsible to keep the system operating. It is, therefore, important to ensure that there are appropriately skilled individuals at each level (school, district, and provincial office) responsible for collecting, recording, analysing and utilising learner absenteeism statistics. It is also important to ensure that the data is recorded accurately. As mentioned in the report, both principals and provincial representatives of the department of education indicated that there was no guarantee that the collected data on learner absenteeism was correct. This is a common problem. Cameron (1974), for example, commenting on an Inner London Education Authority truancy survey, claimed that the school registers were wide open to rigging by head teachers and other interested persons and that there is a good possibility that the attendance registers were systematically underreporting the scale of non-attendance.¹⁷⁴ Ideally, therefore, recording systems should be validated through the use of truancy-sweeps as employed in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. This should happen at school level (executed randomly by the school principal) and at district/provincial level (executed randomly by Department of Education representatives).

¹⁷⁴ Gabb S 1994

Dealing with learner absenteeism requires both a clear approach and policy, as well as effective monitoring systems that can provide a basis for decision-making and intervention. To address these aspects would go beyond the scope of this study and the following recommendations are, therefore, intended to serve as a tentative guide to the approach and the concrete steps that could assist the Department of Education to improve its understanding and management of learner absenteeism in South Africa.

1. Approaches to managing absenteeism should be devised in a holistic way, to take account of the broader problems that contribute to absenteeism, but should also be specific to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the schools and surrounding communities where absenteeism is a problem.
2. The literature review revealed that attendance policies are an important first step in managing, monitoring and reducing learner absenteeism. Schools should be assisted and encouraged to develop these policies.
3. Schools should be accountable to provincial offices and ultimately to the national office of the Department of Education for absenteeism rates, as is the case in, for example, the United Kingdom.
4. In designing the required record keeping and information management system, the Department of Education should first be clear on what information they will need to record and also why they need it. In this regard we recommend developing a system that captures:
 - (a) overall absenteeism rates;
 - (b) distinguishes during capturing between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism;
 - (c) distinguishes during capturing between partial and full absenteeism;
 - (d) records the specific reasons for absenteeism where this is possible;
 - (e) disaggregates the information by gender, and;
 - (f) disaggregates the information by race.
5. Security at schools should be improved. Increased security at schools would be particularly relevant in reducing absenteeism in schools in the Western Cape. Related to this is the need for initiatives to reduce violence and abuse at schools, such as those recommended by the SA Human Rights Commission.
6. Efforts should be made to increase the involvement of parents, representatives of the School Governing Body's and the community in general in ensuring attendance and monitoring absenteeism and truancy. The national Department of Education can, for example, invest in educational programmes

and communication initiatives to highlight to parents the importance of their involvement in their children's education.

7. Expanding access to free basic education to more learners will contribute to reducing levels of absenteeism, as will the extension of feeding schemes/nutrition programmes and the provision of transport assistance to schools.
8. Where the Scholar Transport Subsidy is in place, it needs to be implemented efficiently. For example, circuit managers in the Eastern Cape said that 70 percent of the schools in the province that had applied for the Scholar Transport Subsidy were still waiting for approval from the PED.

The South African Human Rights Commission¹⁷⁵ argues that given the high levels of poverty in South Africa and the high take-up level of transport assistance experiences by the Gauteng Department of Education, clear guidelines need to be drafted in each province that set out the acceptable distance that a child can be expected to walk to school and for the poverty levels of the parent or caregiver that would qualify the child for such transport assistance. These and other concrete measures aimed at improving access to schooling would deal with the main reasons for absenteeism in South Africa, namely the socio-economic factors that inhibit full learner attendance.

¹⁷⁵ SAHRC Public Hearings 2006

8. REFERENCES (NEED CONSISTENCY IN METHOD OF REFERENCING ESP DATES. IN SOME PLACES, CHECK LAYOUT – SPREAD OF PRINT.)

1. ADEA Working Group on Education Statistics (WGES)", accessed January 23, 2007 in (http://nesis.intoweb.co.za/en/index.php?module=pagemaster&PAGE_user_op=view_page&PAGE_id=9&MMN_position=38:38)
2. Asmal K. 2003. Transforming Learning and Teaching through ICT. Department of Education Draft White paper on e-Education.
3. Atkinson M, Halsey K, Wilkin A & Kinder K. 2000. Raising attendance. Slough. NFER
4. Atkinson M & Kinder K. 2000. Starting to join: an evaluation of multi-agency support team activity in schools. Paper presented at BERA, Cardiff, Slough. NFER
5. Buchel A. J. 2006. The Leadership Role of the Principal in Dealing with the Impact of HIV/AIDS in South African Schools, University of South Africa.
6. Budlender D, Child Labour and other work-related activities in South Africa, from the Labour Force Survey, March 2006, draft, 6 July 2007, Department of Labour/Stats SA/ILO
7. Brookes, H., Shisana, O., and Richter, L. 2004 "The National Household HIV Prevalence and Risk Survey of South African Children", (HSRC Press)
8. Crouch L, (undated) Education Indicators in South Africa – Who Needs Them? What For? Some theoretical and practical considerations, Department of Education, South Africa
9. Crouch L A. 2007. Sustainable EMIS – Who is Accountable? <http://home.nc.rr.com/luisecrouch/EDINFO2.doc>
10. Crouch L A & Mthethwa L. 2002. Decentralisation of Information or Information for Decentralisation? The case of South Africa. Paper presented at the Conference on Education and Decentralisation: African experiences and comparative analysis. Johannesburg. South Africa
11. Daily News Reporters, "AIDS Claims Young Lives: Most Positive Tests in 15-24 Age Bracket" (December 1 2006) in (<http://www.iolhiv aids.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=1592&fArticleId=3571666>)
12. Department of Education, 2005 "Education Statistics in South Africa at a glance in 2003", Republic of South Africa
13. Department of Education, EMIS Home, accessed January 23, 2007, <http://www.education.gov.za/emis/emisweb/home.htm>
14. Department of Education. National Policy on Whole School Evaluation: one way to improving quality education in South Africa. Tirisano
15. Department of Education and Skills. 2003. National Statistics, First Release, SFFR 34/2003, Pupil Absence in Schools in England, London
16. Eastern Cape Department of Education. 2003/4. "Imbewu II Comprehensive Evaluation: Attendance Baseline Study 2003/4 (Abridged Report)"
17. Eastern Cape Department of Education. 2004. Comprehensive Evaluation Programme: Drop-out and Repetition Rate Longitudinal Study: Grades 8 – 12, Year One 2004 (Abridged Report).

18. Eastern Cape Department of Education. 2003. Imbewu II Comprehensive Evaluation: 7-year Longitudinal Learner Study on Dropout and Repetition: Baseline Study Grade 1, 2003 (Abridged report).
19. Edward S & Malcolm H. 2002. Research in Education: The causes and effects of truancy, the SCRE Centre
20. Felsenstein D. 1987. "Strategies for Improving School Attendance" in Combating School Absenteeism, Stodder and Houghton.
21. Finlay K. 2005. School Attendance Tracking: challenges and effective practices. National Centre for School Engagement (NCSE). <http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/55.pdf>
22. Gabb S. 1994. Truancy: Its measurement and causation a brief review of the literature. Adapted from chapter two of The Report of the North London Truancy Unit. Published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office. London
23. Government Gazette, Vol. 402, no. 19640, 23 December 1998, Regulation gazette, no. 6397, No. Regulation 1718, Government Notice, "Department of Education, National Education Policy Act" (Act no. 27 of 1996), *Assessment Policy in the General Education and Training Band, Grades 1 to 9 and ABET*
24. Hindle, D. B. (Director General: Department of Education), Hindle is not the author: it is DoE "Education Statistics in South Africa at a glance in 2005, Education Management Information Systems (EMIS)", published November 2006, accessed January 23, 2007, p 4, in (<http://www.education.gov.za/emis/emisweb/05stats/DoE%20Stat%20at%20a%20Glance%2005.pdf>)
25. Holbert T, Wu L & Stark M. 2002. School Attendance Initiative (SAI): The first three years 1998/9-2000/1, Third Annual Evaluation Report, Oregon Department of Human Services
26. HSRC. 2005. Emerging Voices: A report on Education in South African Rural Communities. Researched for the Nelson Mandela Foundations by the HSRC and EPC. HSRC Press. Houghton.
27. HSRC. March 2005. Media Release: Study of Demand and Supply of Educators in South African Public Schools.
28. Hua, H. and Herstein, J. 2003 Education Management Information Systems (EMIS): Integrated data and information systems and their implications in educational management, paper presented at the "Annual Conference of Comparative and International Education Society", New Orleans, LA, USA, March 2003
29. Institute of Education Sciences National Centre for Education Statistics. 2006. The Condition of Education 2006. Department of Education. Washington
30. Lindsay G, Muijs D & Band S. 2006. Evaluation of Capital Modernisation Funding for Electronic Registration in Selected Secondary Schools. Centre for Educational Policy Development. Appraisal and Research (CEDAR). <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cedar/projects/completed06/electronicreg/>

31. Malcolm H, Wilson V, Davidson J. Kirk S. 2003. Absence from School: A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs. The SCRA Centre, University of Glasgow, Department of Education and Skills, Research Report RR424.
32. McKay, E and Heard, W. (2004) Education Management Systems in the era of HIV and AIDS: an introduction, "Mobile Task Team (MTT) on the impact of HIV/ AIDS on education"
33. Morris M & Rutt S. 2004. Analysis of Pupil Attendance Date in Excellence in Cities (EiC) Areas: An interim report, Research Report No. 571, Department of Education and Skills. UK.
34. Moseki, M. 2004 "The Nature of Truancy and the Lifeworld of Truants in Secondary Schools", University of South Africa
35. Moses, K. 2000 (Vice President, Academy for Educational Development), *Information Systems for Education Management*, May/June "TechKnowLogia, Knowledge Enterprise Inc." www.TechKnowLogia.org, accessed January 24, 2007 [http://www.techknowlogia.org/TKL_active_pages2/CurrentArticles/main.asp?IssueNumber=5&File eType=PDF&ArticleID=126](http://www.techknowlogia.org/TKL_active_pages2/CurrentArticles/main.asp?IssueNumber=5&FileType=PDF&ArticleID=126)
36. Murgatroyd, S. 1987 *Combating Truancy: A Counselling Approach* in Combating School Absenteeism (Ed: K. Reid), Stodder and Houghton
37. National Treasury "Provincial Budgets and Expenditure Review: 2002/3-2008/9", Republic of South Africa (<http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/ifr/2006/prov/13.%20Annexure%20B%20-20%Non-financial%20Tables.pdf>, January 12 2007)
38. Oregon Department of Human Services. June 2002. Third Annual Evaluation Report, School Attendance Initiative: The first three years 1998/99-2000/1. Multnomah County, US
39. Phurutse, M C. 2005. "Factors Affecting Teaching and Learning in South African Public Schools", HSRC Press.
40. Railsback J. June 2004. Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from research and practice. North West Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland.
41. Reid K. 1987. "Editors Introduction" in Combating School Absenteeism, Stodder and Houghton
42. Research in Education: University of Glasgow SCRE. 2002. "The Causes and Effects of Truancy" Newsletter No. 71
43. Reynolds D. 1987. "School Effectiveness and Truancy" in Combating School Absenteeism, Stodder and Houghton
44. South African Human Rights Commission. January 2007. Report of the Public Hearing on the Right to Basic Education. http://www.sahrc.org.za/sahrc_cms/downloads/RBE_Report.pdf
45. Staffordshire Education Department. 2001. Attendance Policy, Pupil and Student Services, Social Inclusions Unit.
46. Stoll P. 1990. Absent pupils who are officially present. *Education Today*, 40, 3.
47. Tasmania Government Publications. 2002. "At school, on time, ready for work", www.premier.tas.gov.publications
48. Taylor, A. 2001 *Governance and Management of Education in post-Apartheid South Africa*, paper presented at the "Conference for Organization of Ministries of Education, International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)", 20-21 June 2001

49. Republic of South Africa. 1996. The South African Schools Act (No.84 of 1996), Should include Gazette number etc
50. Trucano M. 2007. Education Management Information Systems (EMIS): Case Studies and Lessons Learned. Information for Development Programme, <http://www.infodev.org/en/Project.5.html>
51. Tung K. C. 2003. The Vision of Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) in Wako T.N. Education Management Systems: An Overview, <http://www.harare.unesco.org/documents/2005/Educational%20Management%20Information%20Systems.pdf>
52. US Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics. 2006. The Conditions of Education 2006, NCES 2006-071, Washington DC, Government Printing Office, <http://nces.ed.gov/pusearch/pubsinfo.sap?pubid=2006071>
53. US Department of Education, Submissions of data by State Educational Agencies. Federal Register. Vol 70. No. 30, January 2005, <http://www.ed.gov/news/fedregister>
54. Voigts F. "The Quality of Education: Some Policy Suggestions Based on a Survey of Schools" SACMEQ Policy Research: Report No. 2 (Kenneth Ross Ed)
55. Wako T. N. November 2003. Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) – a guide for young managers. NESIS/UNESCO. Harare, Zimbabwe, http://nesis.intoweb.co.za/en/index.php?module=documents&JAS_DocumentManager_op=downloadFile&JAS_File_id=20
56. Whitney B. 1994. The truth about truancy. London: Kogan Page.
57. Wittenberg M. May 2005, "The School Day in South Africa", Working Paper No. 113, Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town
58. Zafar S, Kgobe P, Napo V and Parker B. September 2005. An assessment of Education Policy and Educational Interventions to Address Concerns relating to Child Labour in South Africa, Research Report, Centre for Education Policy Development, TECL Programme, Pretoria.

ANNEXURE 1: CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOL REGISTERS

SCHOOL REGISTER

Name of School:

Date of visit:

1. How are learners that are absent recorded in the DAILY register? Describe.
(eg. Name of learner, absent for whole day or part of the day)

2. How frequently is learner attendance (and absenteeism) information aggregated?

Frequency of aggregation	Yes	No
Daily		
Weekly		
Monthly		
Quarterly		
Annually		
Not aggregated		

3. In what form is it recorded (where?) What summary statistics if any, are recorded?
Describe.

4. What is the total number of absentees for 2006?

5. What was the total number of absentee days in 2006?

--

6. If information is not available, why is that so?

7. Write down the total number of learners absent from school for the whole day on:

February 6th 2007	
February 9th 2007	

8. List the documents that the school uses to record learner attendance:

1		
2		
3		
4		

Provide information on the extent of use of each of the above listed official documents (e.g. is it up to date?)

9. Notes on observations

10. Which of the following aggregations are used by the schools in measuring learner absenteeism?

- a. Number of absentee days for the year per learner?
- b. Number of absentee days for the year for all learners?
- c. Number of learners who are absent in a single day?
- d. Number of learners who are absent per quarter or per annum?

MAKE PHOTOCOPIES OF RELEVANT DOCUMENTS (REGISTERS) FOR 2006 AND/OR 2007, IF THE 2006 REGISTER IS VERY LONG.

ANNEXURE 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR CIRCUIT MANAGERS

**NATIONAL STUDY ON LEARNER ABSENTEEISM:
DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR CIRCUIT MANAGERS**

Province:

Date:

Name of Respondents	District	Telephone Numbers
1)		
2)		
3)		
4)		
5)		

1. INTRODUCTION

My name is and I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this discussion. I am a researcher from the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E), which has been contracted by the National Department of Education to conduct a study into learner absenteeism nationally.

2. DISCUSSION GUIDE: GENERAL AND REASONS FOR LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

2.1 Does the district have a formal/informal policy on learner absenteeism that guides schools on how to record, manage, report on and monitor learner absenteeism?

Yes		No		Don't know	
If yes, please indicate whether formal or		Formal		Informal	

informal policy		
-----------------	--	--

2.2. If yes, what does the policy expect of schools with respect to the:

- a) recording of learner absenteeism
- b) Reporting of learner absenteeism
- c) Monitoring of learner absenteeism
- d) Managing of learner absenteeism

2.3. When do you regard a learner as being absent (absent for part of the day or the whole day)?

--

2.4. Is there a problem of learner absenteeism in the schools of your district?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

2.5. If yes, what is the extent of the problem?

Widespread absenteeism in schools	
Limited to certain schools	
Some absenteeism reported, but infrequent	
Other, please specify:	

2.6. If there is not a problem of learner absenteeism, please elaborate.

2.7 What is the impact of each of the following factors on learner attendance?

	No impact	Moderate	High impact
Drug use and availability			
Food insecurity			
Transport problems			
Rural schooling			
Level of family income/ financial constraints			
High rates of teenage pregnancy			
Illness and disease among learners/ teachers/ parents			
Educator-learner relationships/ ongoing corporal punishment			
Classroom overcrowding			
Violence and bullying in schools			
Lack of school uniforms			
Poor school facilities			
Educator incompetence/ under-qualified			
Language – English as a medium of instruction			
Poor academic performance			
Lack of parental involvement in learners schooling			
Psychological difficulties – fear of failure, low self-esteem?			
Other			

3. DISCUSSION GUIDE: MONITORING OF LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

3.1. Do you collect information about learner absenteeism from schools in your district?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.2. If yes, what kinds of information do you collect? (include options below)

Learner absenteeism figures by schools to district office	
Learner absenteeism figures by schools to provincial office	
Collected from schools by district officials	
Other, please specify:	

3.3. How is the information collected?

Class registers	
Information provided in special report format (obtain example)	
Via provincial head office	
Collected at schools by district officials	

3.4. In what form is the information supplied or collected? Please describe the information.

3.5. Does the information give a breakdown by sex and population group?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.6. Do you analyse the information supplied to you?

No (go to next question)	
Yes	
Yes, sometimes	
If yes, do you aggregate the information on learner absenteeism according to any of the following time periods: Monthly Quarterly Biannually Annually	

3.7. Does the province supply attendance registers to schools? Yes/No

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.8. If not, how do schools record learner attendance?

3.9. Do schools generally record learner attendance and absenteeism daily in the register?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.10. If yes, is data recorded accurately?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

Please explain.

3.11. If not, about what % of schools in your district do not record learner attendance /absenteeism?

--

3.12. Do schools receive District Education Management Information Systems (DEMIS) forms to complete?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.13. If yes, is learner attendance data also captured in the DEMIS forms?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.14. If yes, what types of learner attendance data are collected through the DEMIS forms? Please describe.

--

3.15. How often do school principals submit completed DEMIS forms?

Weekly	Monthly	Less frequently	Other
--------	---------	-----------------	-------

3.16. What kinds of measures do you have in place to ensure that information on learner absenteeism is accurate and reliable?

No measures in place
Measures in place, please describe:

4. DISCUSSION GUIDE: STRATEGIES TO REDUCE LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

4.1. Does the district provide support to schools to deal with learner absenteeism?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

4.2. Does the district office have specialised staff for this function?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

4.3. If yes, who deals with this function (circuit manager, Education Support Services, community liaison)?

4.4. What does the district actually do to support schools to deal with learner absenteeism?

4.5. Do schools in your district have a policy on learner attendance?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

4.6. Is there any inter-departmental cooperation to reduce learner absenteeism?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

If yes, please elaborate: (which departments: Social Services, Security??)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4.7. What do you see at the most important challenge(s) in reducing learner absenteeism?

4.8. What can the district office do to help schools in this regard?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4.9. What can provinces do to support districts to reduce learner absenteeism?

4.10. What role should national DoE play in promoting learner attendance?

Thank you for participating in this study

ANNEXURE 3: DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR PROVINCIAL DoE REPRESENTATIVE

**NATIONAL STUDY ON LEARNER ABSENTEEISM:
DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR REPRESENTATIVES FROM
PROVINCIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS**

Province		
Name of Respondent		
Position of Respondent		
Directorate/Sub-Directorate		
Address of respondent		
Telephone Number (W)		(c)
Fax Number		

1. INTRODUCTION

My name is and I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this discussion. I am a researcher from the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E), which has been contracted by the national Department of Education to conduct a study into learner absenteeism nationally.

2. DISCUSSION GUIDE: GENERAL AND REASONS FOR LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

2.2 Do you have a formal/informal policy on learner absenteeism that guides districts and schools on how to record, manage, report on and monitor learner absenteeism?

Yes		No		Don't know	
If yes, please indicate whether formal or		Formal		Informal	

informal policy		
-----------------	--	--

2.2. When do you regard a learner as being absent?

--

2.3. Is there a problem of learner absenteeism in your province?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

2.4. If yes, what is the extent of the problem?

Widespread absenteeism in schools	
Limited to certain schools	
Some absenteeism reported, but infrequent	
Other, please specify:	

2.5. Could you perhaps comment on the following factors and the extent of their impact on learner absenteeism:

	No impact	Moderate	High impact
Drug use and availability			
Transport problems			
Food insecurity			
Level of family income/ financial constraints			
Teenage pregnancy			
Illness and infections among learners/ teachers/ parents			
Educator-learner relationships			
Classroom overcrowding			
Violence and bullying in schools			
Lack of school uniforms			
Poor school facilities			
Educator incompetence/ under-qualified			
Language – English as a medium of instruction			
Poor academic performance			
Lack of parental involvement in learners schooling			
Psychological difficulties – fear of failure, low self-esteem etc			
Other			

3. DISCUSSION GUIDE: MONITORING OF LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

3.1. Have schools been advised to record learner attendance (absenteeism)?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.2. If yes, what guidelines have been given to schools for recording information?

Guidelines that cover:	Yes	No
Number of learners absent		
Frequency of absenteeism of learners		

Detail of learners that are absent eg. sex, population group		
Other, please specify:		

3.3. Do you receive information from schools on learner attendance and absenteeism?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

3.4. If yes, how often?

Weekly	
Monthly	
Every term	
Bi-annually	
Annually	

3.5. In what form do you receive the information on learner absenteeism?

Number of learners absent by school	
Number of learners absent by district	
Number of learners absent with details of the duration of absence	
Number of learners absent with details of the duration of absence and details of the learners (sex, population group, grade)	
Other, please describe	

3.6. Do you analyse the information supplied to you?

No (go to next question)	
--------------------------	--

Yes	
Yes, sometimes	
If yes, do you aggregate the information on learner absenteeism according to any of the following time periods: Monthly Quarterly Biannually Annually	

3.7. What kinds of measures do you have in place to ensure that information on learner absenteeism is accurate and reliable?

No measures in place
Measures in place, please describe:

Interviewer to probe for problems encountered with the above.

4. DISCUSSION GUIDE: STRATEGIES TO REDUCE LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

4.1. Do you have any strategies in place to deal with the problem of learner absenteeism?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

4.2. If so, please describe these and indicate which have been successful and which unsuccessful?

Strategy	Successful	Unsuccessful

--	--	--

4.3. Is there any inter-departmental cooperation to reduce learner absenteeism?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

If yes, please elaborate:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4.4. Are there any dedicated members of staff at the provincial level to deal with learner absenteeism?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

Comment:

.....
.....
.....
.....

4.5. What do you see at the most important challenges in reducing learner absenteeism?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4.6. What can provinces do to support districts to reduce learner absenteeism?

4.7. What role should national DoE play in promoting learner attendance?

Thank you for participating in this study

ANNEXURE 4: DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SGB REPRESENTATIVE

**NATIONAL STUDY ON LEARNER ABSENTEEISM:
DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SGB REPRESENTATIVES**

Province:

School (indicate whether primary & secondary):

Date:

Name of Respondents	Telephone Numbers	Email Address
1)		
2)		
3)		
4)		
5)		

1. INTRODUCTION

My name is and I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this discussion. I am a researcher from the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E), which has been contracted by the National Department of Education to conduct a study into learner absenteeism nationally.

2. DISCUSSION GUIDE: LEARNER ABSENTEEISM & SGB

2.1. Does the SGB have a formal/informal policy on learner absenteeism that guides schools on how to record, manage, report on and monitor LA?

Yes	No	Don't know
If yes, please indicate whether formal or informal policy	Formal	Informal

2.2. When do you regard a learner as being absent?

--

2.3. Have you received reports on learner absenteeism from the school?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

2.4. If yes, exactly what information is supplied to you? Please describe the information

--

2.5. Is there a problem of learner absenteeism at your school?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

2.6. If yes, what is the extent of the problem?

Widespread absenteeism	
Limited to certain times in the year	
Some absenteeism reported, but infrequent	
Other, please specify:	

3. DISCUSSION GUIDE: REASONS FOR LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

3.1. Could you perhaps comment on the following factors and the extent of their impact on learner absenteeism:

	No impact	Moderate	High impact
Drug use and availability			
Transport problems			
Food insecurity			
Level of family income/ financial constraints			
Teenage pregnancy			
Illness and infections among learners/ teachers/ parents			
Educator-learner relationships			
Classroom overcrowding			
Violence and bullying in schools			
Lack of school uniforms			
Poor school facilities			
Educator incompetence/ under-qualified			
Language – English as a medium of instruction			
Poor academic performance			
Lack of parental involvement in learners schooling			
Psychological difficulties – fear of failure, low self-esteem etc			
Other			

4. DISCUSSION GUIDE: MEASURES TO CURB LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

4.1. Has the SGB interacted with parents or members of the community to reduce learner absenteeism?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

4.2. If yes, what was the outcome?

4.3. What has been the role of the SGB in reducing learner absenteeism?

4.4. Have these measures been effective in reducing absenteeism?

4.5. What do you see at the most important challenges in reducing learner absenteeism?

4.6. What can SGBs do to overcome these challenges?

Thank you for participating in this study

ANNEXURE 5: DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

**NATIONAL STUDY ON LEARNER ABSENTEEISM:
INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PRINCIPALS OF SCHOOLS
2007**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name of Respondent		
School name		
School Address		
Telephone Numbers	(school)	(c)
Fax Number	(f)	

Province		
Location urban/ rural/ farm		
Number of learners		
Interviewer name		
Date of interview		

1. DISCUSSION GUIDE: POLICIES AND MONITORING

- 1.1. Do you have a formal/informal policy that guides teachers on how to record and monitor learner absenteeism?
- 1.1.1. Formal 1 Informal 2

Yes	3	No	4	Don't know	4
-----	---	----	---	------------	---

- 1.2. When is a learner regarded as being absent? (whole day, partial day)

--

1.3. After what period of continuous absence do you consider a learner to have dropped out? That is, the learners' name is withdrawn from the register.

--

1.4. Does your school maintain an attendance register for learners?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

1.5. Have you received your attendance registers from the DoE? (provincial)

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

1.5.1. If not, what measures are you taking to record learner attendance?

Have bought our own attendance registers	1
Other	2

1.6. Do you keep any of the following records?

Records	Yes	No
1.6.1. Learner profile	1	2
1.6.2. Learner withdrawal records (that is, records of those learners who drop out)	1	2
1.6.3. Transfer cards	1	2

1.7. How many learners would you say are absent on an average day in your school?

Less than 20	1
20 – 50	2
More than 50	3
Don't know	4

2. DISCUSSION GUIDE: RELATIONSHIP WITH DISTRICT/ PROVINCE

2.1. Do you report to the district authorities specifically on learner absenteeism?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

2.2. If yes, is there a specific form that you complete?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

2.2.1. If yes, please describe what information the form requires?

2.3. If you do report to the district, what detail do you report regarding learner absenteeism?

Number of learners absent	1
Number of learners absent by grade	2
Number of learners absent by gender	3
Number of learners absent by race	4
Number of learners absent and number of days absent	5
Other	6

2.4. How often do you report on learner absenteeism to the District Office?

Every term	1
Twice a year	2
Once a year	3
Not at all	4
Other	5

2.5. Is your register examined by the district official during school visits?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

2.6. Do you submit the register to the district office?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

2.7. What resources or support do you receive from the district authorities to help you deal with learner absenteeism?

2.7.1. Resources:
2.7.2. Support:

2.8. What resources or support do you receive from the provincial authorities to help you deal with learner absenteeism?

2.8.1. Resources:

2.8.2. Support:

2.9. What role, in your opinion, should the National Department play in assisting schools manage, monitor and reduce learner absenteeism?

--

2.10. What role, in your opinion, should the Provincial Department play in assisting schools manage, monitor and reduce learner absenteeism?

--

3. DISCUSSION GUIDE: REASONS FOR LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

3.1. Please comment on the following factors and the extent of their impact on learner absenteeism:

	No impact	Moderate	High impact
3.1.1. Drug use and availability	1	2	3
3.1.2. Transport problems	1	2	3
3.1.3. Food insecurity	1	2	3
3.1.4. Level of family income/ financial constraints	1	2	3
3.1.5. Teenage pregnancy	1	2	3
3.1.6. Illness and infections among learners/ teachers/ parents	1	2	3
3.1.7. Educator-learner relationships	1	2	3
3.1.8. Classroom overcrowding	1	2	3
3.1.9. Violence and bullying in schools	1	2	3
3.1.10. Lack of school uniforms	1	2	3
3.1.11. Poor school facilities	1	2	3
3.1.12. Educator incompetence/ under-qualified	1	2	3
3.1.13. Language – English as a medium of instruction	1	2	3
3.1.14. Poor academic performance	1	2	3
3.1.15. Lack of parental involvement in learners schooling	1	2	3
3.1.16. Psychological difficulties – fear of failure, low self-esteem etc	1	2	3
3.1.17. Other	1	2	3

4. DISCUSSION GUIDE: MEASURES TO CURB LEARNER ABSENTEEISM

4.1. What measures do you have in place to increase learner attendance?

	No	Yes
4.1.1.School Nutrition Programme	1	2
4.1.2.Sporting activities	1	2
4.1.3. After-school centre	1	2
4.1.4. Extra-curricular activities	1	2
4.1.5. Have system of merits and demerits in operation	1	2
4.1.6. Have method for honouring learners for good attendance record	1	2
4.1.7. Other		3

4.2. What steps have you taken to reduce learner absenteeism?

4.2.1. Work with SGB	1
4.2.2. Deal directly with family members	2
4.2.3. Counsel learners	3
4.2.4 Other, please elaborate	4

4.3. Do you employ a guidance counsellor?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

4.4. Is a counsellor likely to contribute to a reduction in learner absenteeism? Please elaborate.

--

4.5. What do you see as the most important challenges in reducing learner absenteeism?

Thank you for participating in this study

ANNEXURE 6: SCHOOL RECORD KEEPING AND SOURCES OF DOCUMENTS

School	Documents used	Does the school receive the relevant documents from the Department of Education?
King Shaka High School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Pinetown Boys High	Electronic, Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Pella Primary School	Daily register, biannual reports to DoE	No
Siyamu Junior Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Hlokoma High School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Southernwood Primary	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Phillip Mtywaku Secondary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Fanti Gaqa Senior Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Flamingo Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Radirile Intermediate School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report & Snap Surveys	Yes
Hoer Tegniese Skool (Secondary school)	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Bokomose Secondary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Pietersburg Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
O.R. Mabotja Secondary School	Period register, Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Lekazi Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Lekazi Secondary School	Period register, Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Malelane Primary School	Electronic system, Daily register, summary register & quarterly report & snap surveys	No

Lwaleng Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Gaetsho Secondary School	Period attendance registers,	Yes
Redibone Middle School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Boiteko Primary School	Daily register & summary register	Yes
Moroko High School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Kgauho Secondary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	Yes
Ditlatse Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Mannenber Primary	Daily register, weekly summary sheet, & quarterly report	No
Guguletu Comprehensive (a.k.a. Intshukumo Secondary)	Daily register, weekly summary register	No
Milnerton High School	Electronic system, daily and weekly registers and quarterly report.	No
Greenside High	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No
Tsakane Secondary School	Attendance register, weekly summaries	Yes
Empumalanga Primary School	Daily register, summary register & quarterly report	No

ANNEXURE 7: GENERAL RECORD KEEPING FOR ABSENTEEISM

School	Does school keep learner profiles?	Does school keep records of withdrawals?	Does the school keep transfer cards?
King Shaka High School	No	Yes	Yes
Pinetown Boys High	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pella Primary School	No	Yes	Yes
Siyamu Junior Primary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hlokoma High School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Southernwood Primary	Yes	Yes	Yes
Phillip Mtywaku Secondary School	No	No	No
Fanti Gaqa Senior Primary School	No	Yes	Yes
Flamingo Primary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radirile Intermediate School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hoer Tegniese Skool (Secondary school)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bokomose Secondary School	No	Yes	Yes
Pietersburg Primary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
O.R. Mabotja Secondary School	Yes	No	Yes
Lekazi Primary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lekazi Secondary School	No	No	Yes
Malelane Primary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lwaleng Primary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gaetsho Secondary School	No	No	No
Redibone Middle School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Boiteko Primary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Moroko High School	No	No	Yes
Kgauho Secondary School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ditlatse Primary School	No	Yes	Yes
Mannenbergh Primary	Yes	Yes	Yes
Guguletu Comprehensive (a.k.a. Intshukumo Secondary)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Milnerton High School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Greenside High	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tsakane Secondary School	No	Yes	Yes
Empumalanga Primary School	Yes	No	No