

Rethinking Rewards and Incentives for Rural Teachers

Executive summary

Rural schools are confronted with the challenge of teacher retention due to poor working conditions, lack of support from the department and insufficient incentives and rewards. This situation leads to teacher attrition and teacher migration from rural to urban schools. The Department of Basic Education and rural schools are faced with the challenge of designing effective strategies that can mitigate the exodus of teachers. Investment of time and resources to address these challenges can have a lasting effect on the process of teacher retention in rural schools. This can be achieved by ensuring that teachers' working conditions, teacher education and development programmes, social security arrangements, pension schemes and salaries are attractive and are specific to the needs of rural teachers.

This policy brief argues that relevant rewards and incentives are central to teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools. It concludes by giving examples of rewards and incentives for consideration by policy makers.

Background and Context

Mulkeen (2005) posits that there are many qualified teachers who prefer teaching in urban schools because of better working conditions. Hammond and Sclan (1996) argued that "it is clear that the shape of the teaching work force depends not only on the qualities and qualifications of individuals who enter, but also on how occupational workplace factors affect teachers' decisions to enter, stay in, or leave the profession". The Department for International Development (DFID) (2007) maintains that working in rural schools is considerably more difficult and thus more de-motivating than in urban schools due mainly to poor living and working conditions. Many teachers at rural schools do feel disadvantaged (SADTU, 2014). But, teachers who work at schools in their home areas tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction than their colleagues who are 'strangers' in the locality.

For the majority of poor schools, teachers are the best resources learners have towards a better education (McNeil, 2004). Adelabu (2005) further argues that quality in a school system is largely a function of the level of motivation and job commitment of teachers within the system. It is for this reason that teachers should be paid well and their working conditions be conducive to teaching and learning. If a teacher is satisfied with these aspects of his or her occupation, the decision is often made to be a 'stayer'. If a teacher is dissatisfied with these aspects, the decision is often made to become a 'leaver'. Research has shown that teachers who are not satisfied with their living and working conditions are poorly motivated. The key reasons for this are:

- *Low wages when compared with other professionals*
- *Low status in society*
- *Lack of career advancement opportunities*
- *High teacher –pupil ratios*
- *Poor work environment*
- *Inadequate fringe benefits*
- *Irregular payment of teacher salaries (Adelabu, 2005).*

Poor working conditions and rewards in the teaching profession contribute to high rates of teacher attrition (Billingsley, 1993; Carnegie Foundation, 1990). It is clear that compensation has been a major factor in teacher turnover for some time, and remedies have not been forthcoming to do anything about it. One could predict from equity theory (Cascio, 1987) that teachers who do not believe that they are compensated equitably for the work and hardships they endure will take action to remedy the inequity, one of which is leaving the profession. Teacher pay is lower than that for some key equivalent occupations in the public sector (Adelabu, 2005). To retain teachers, the government should ensure that they are paid adequately and have benefits appropriate to their needs.

Methodology

The findings and recommendations of this policy brief were drawn from a research study (Incentives and Rewards for Rural Teachers) that sought to explore incentives and rewards for rural teachers in South Africa and previous research done on this topical issue. This was augmented by a review of literature about issues of incentives and rewards nationally, regionally and internationally.

Key findings

The question of incentives and rewards for rural teachers in South Africa has not fully been addressed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The findings suggest that the DBE has been using a policy that is ambiguous and has done very little to attract and retain teachers in rural schools. This can be summarised as follows:

- Policy is ambiguous on what is a rural school or 'hard- to -teach school'. The policy also does not state what type of incentives and rewards teachers qualify for once they are employed in a rural or 'hard- to- teach' school.
- Teachers are leaving to join other professions that pay better salaries and have better working conditions.
- Teachers prefer to stay in rural areas due to their family ties, however, many teachers migrate to urban and private schools due to improved incentives.

Policy recommendations for rethinking rewards and incentives of rural teachers

Given the current situation wherein teachers in rural schools are dissatisfied with salaries and working conditions, leading to lack of motivation, there is a need to rethink and reformulate policy in order to attract and retain good quality teachers in rural schools. To achieve this, the following policy recommendations are made:

- *Refrain from having different incentives across provinces.* The teacher Incentive Policy should apply uniformly across all the provinces identified as rural, taking account of any variations, for example, schools in "deep rural" areas might warrant greater incentives for their teachers compared to a rural school located close to a tarred road. Incentives for teachers in rural areas should, nonetheless, aim to be standardized across provinces (as long as one is comparing 'apples with apples'). Standardized teacher incentives could reduce the high number of teachers being concentrated in one province where incentives are higher than the rest of the other provinces.

- *Introduce a relevant policy plan for teacher professional development of rural teachers:* The teacher development plan should be structured in a way that it provides teachers in rural areas with continuous knowledge and skills development opportunities to enhance their professional growth. Teachers of rural children work in situations that require substantial expertise to be successful, such as multi-grade classrooms with few resources and classrooms with children who do not speak the official languages of instruction. These teachers must receive initial training that is adequate and relevant to the conditions they will face, as well as continuing in-service training and development relevant to their classroom conditions. Given the remoteness of many schools that teach rural children, it is also important to move training opportunities closer to teachers either physically or through the use of technology (see, for example, Chudgar and Luschei, 2013:108-9).
- *Methods of payment and compensation:* In order to improve the current system, incentives should be paid from the provincial district using the same payment method employed by the PERSAL system. This could reduce the issue of many teachers not being paid their incentives on time and avoiding mismanagement of funds. Ensuring such efficiency could help retain teachers in rural areas.

At a general level, slow or inadequate compensation of teachers in rural environments can pose challenges and reduce motivation of these teachers. As is widely known, teachers in remote locations can spend much time and effort retrieving their monthly salaries. One solution that is being tested in Afghanistan, is the use of technology, specifically the use of mobile banking to pay teachers in a timely manner. (Chudgar and Luschei, 2013:106)

- *Proper housing and other benefits.* Teachers, given their level of education and knowledge, place a high value on good and safe living conditions, which make the provision of good quality, safe housing a priority, especially for 'non-resident' teachers who may be used to urban or peri-urban conditions. Better housing and availability of housing loans are useful incentives in ensuring rural teachers are retained in their posts. Alternatively, the provision of decent housing in cooperation with communities, close to the rural schools will prevent longer travelling time, high travel costs and help to combat the late arrival of teachers to schools.

For those teachers who need to travel long distances, a transport subsidy could be considered. An additional incentive for rural teachers could be the availability of bursaries for their children in furthering their studies at higher education institutions. In addition, there could be incentives and rewards for teachers in scarce skills subjects, such as Mathematics and Science, to teach in rural schools that lack such expertise. This could help retain teachers with scarce skills in the profession due to recognition of their value, and could also be linked to teacher professional development.

- *Binding contracts (bursary scheme) for pre-service teachers:* In countries like Sri Lanka, all teachers are expected to work for at least 3 years in rural schools. The

binding bursary scheme requires and binds newly qualified teachers to teach for specific years in the rural areas. SACE (2011) suggested that binding contracts of pre-service teachers may be allowed to indicate their preference in terms of provincial departments they wish to work for, but the allocation of teachers could be limited to rural schools for a stipulated period of the required service provision as indicated by the bursary.

However, binding contracts for especially newly-qualified teachers need to be carefully assessed, taking account the wishes and preferences of teacher recruits. Once teachers are hired, they need to experience initial success in teaching to establish a sense of optimism that they will be able to succeed in their chosen career. This is difficult for novice teachers being sent to work in the most difficult and complex environments. Such systems of teacher allocation can reduce new teachers' sense of efficacy and increase the likelihood that they will either exit the profession or seek teaching positions in more desirable locations. "While it might be tempting to allocate the newest teachers to regions most in need of teachers, policymakers should carefully consider the implications of this form of student-teacher matching" (Chudgar and Luschei, 2013:106).

Conclusion

There is a need to improve working conditions and incentives to encourage the retention of teachers in rural areas. Many teachers prefer teaching in urban areas due to better living and working conditions, such as salaries being paid on time, access to decent housing, teacher education programmes, shopping and other living amenities. As a result, teachers in rural schools should be paid well, provided with appropriate incentives and have their working conditions improved. Ultimately, attracting and retaining the best-qualified and experienced teachers in all schools will contribute to the provision of quality basic education. There is a need therefore to rethink and reformulate the current teacher incentive policy on rural schools.

References

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