POLICY BRIEF

Providing Enough Instructional Time for Children to Learn to Read

NOVEMBER 2017
Background: Time on Task

International research examining time on task supports the conclusion that learning gains among students are maximized when time on task or “engaged learning time” is maximized. In fact, international best practice dictates that to bolster students’ opportunity to learn, the school year must have a minimal instructional time between 850 and 1,000 hours per year. While improvements have been made in Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of instructional hours, these improvements leave much to be desired. Particularly in early grades, the median yearly instructional hours fall short of these best practices. The reality is increasingly evident when considered within the global educational context where countries such as the United States, China, Japan, and Germany boast significantly higher median yearly instructional hours.

Various reasons account for low levels of instructional time in schools. Chief among these reasons is the challenge of teacher absenteeism. What accounts for teacher absenteeism? First, research suggests that contextual matters. Teacher absenteeism is lower in urban communities compared to their rural counterparts. Second, accountability mechanisms matter. Limited and/or ineffective monitoring by both internal and external actors is correlated with higher levels of teacher absenteeism. Third, the distance from the branch Ministry of Education office has also been correlated with teacher absenteeism. Higher rates of teacher absenteeism are associated with greater distance from a branch office of education.

A nation’s economic prospects follow the learning curve of its children.

- (Gove, A. and P. Cvelich, 2010)

While instructional time provides useful preliminary insights related to learner’s engagement, this factor provides only a snapshot of a pupil’s engagement. As noted above, time on task is a measure of engagement.

Instructional time is often squandered on tasks unrelated to teaching. In some classrooms, studies have shown that only 63 percent of class time was devoted to teaching activities. What is more, when teaching activities were undertaken, the vast majority of this time was spent on lecture-based lessons as opposed to interactive lessons. Therefore, the challenge of time on task reaches beyond simply mandating increased instructional hours. Addressing the challenge of time on task must consider how instructional time is used within the classroom.

Fundings from Bauchi, Sokoto and Federal Level

In Bauchi and Sokoto states, data shows that time on task is much lower than the international standard of between 850 and 1,000 hours of instructional time, with only 630 hours of timetabled instructional time per year, and even less in reality. Since the inception of the Initiative, encouraging policy shifts have occurred. The numbers of periods for Hausa for learners in primary 1-3 has increased from five 30-minute periods to ten 30-minute periods a week in both Bauchi and Sokoto, ultimately doubling the time on task for early grade reading. Gains in instructional time are realized when teachers use structured lessons to teach early grade reading. Findings from the Reading and Access Research Activity (RARA) intervention in 2015 show that in 30-minutes of class time, teachers at baseline without the use of structured lessons only taught 10 percent of the lesson (three minutes). At endline teachers using a structured lesson taught reading 80 percent of the 30-minute lesson (24 minutes).

Despite these achievements, there is still work to be done. In Bauchi and Sokoto states, teacher tardiness and absenteeism remain a hindrance to time on task. The pie chart (above) is an outcome of policy dialogues held in Bauchi and Sokoto in 2016. Educational officials participating in the dialogue were asked to estimate how much learning time is lost due to teacher absenteeism and other events at the school. The pie chart shows the total hours of timetabled instructional time. At 630 hours, the total instructional hours depicted above, this is far below...
the minimum instructional time of 850 hours, according to global research. Participants estimated the actual instructional time of 239 hours in a year, with an estimated 391 hours of lost opportunities for learning. With this low amount of instructional time in schools, it is likely that many children will fail to learn to read in school.

Trainings, visits to the LGEA Secretariat, participation in teacher verification exercises, and the collection of salaries are all factors that feed into the prevalence of teacher absenteeism in Bauchi and Sokoto states. Beyond teacher absenteeism, pupil absenteeism must also be considered. For example, for learners in rural communities, absences often occur on market days or during planting or harvest seasons as a result of expectations to provide support to family on these days. The cumulative effect of tardiness and absenteeism of teachers can significantly diminish instructional time over the year.

Finally, instructional time in primary grades at 3.5 hours/day is far below international standards. Combined with long morning/breakfast breaks and other disruptions, the 3.5 hours is likely rarely reached.

The Initiative is working with SUBEB in both states to study time on task in schools. A report that is expected to provide greater insight into instructional time at schools is due in early 2018.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase the instructional time in primary grades 1-3 to at least five hours a day. Reduce morning breakfast break to 20 minutes.

2. Address teacher absenteeism in several ways:
   - Strengthen headteacher roles and practices in holding teachers accountable for daily and on time attendance.
   - Strengthen SSOs role and practices in providing support and supervision to schools to increase teacher time on task in the classroom and their attendance at school.
   - Develop reasonable but effective consequences for unexcused teacher absenteeism by implementing verifiable attendance systems (e.g. mobile apps), docking pay for absenteeism, and providing rewards for perfect attendance.
   - Pay teachers on time.
   - Strengthen LGEA capacity to monitor and support schools and communities to improve teacher and pupil attendance.

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**Endnotes**


5. See citation above.


