

TIME-ON-TASK:

Maximising student learning time and minimising downtime

January 2018

Prepared by NEEDU

SUMMARY: Time spent on non-instructional issues accounts for at least 30 percent of a 200-day school year in many schools. In some schools, that figure climbs beyond 40 percent.

The centrality of learning time lies in the fact that if it is not managed effectively, it has a negative impact on learner proficiency owing to reduced learning opportunities.

Managing teaching time tightly to make every minute count is a prevalent practice in all high-performing schools or *schools that work*.

This advocacy brief examines best practices that are exhibited by the schools that work. These practices are intended to assist school improvement planning.

The condition of schools adhering strictly to time allocated to teaching consistently emerges in research as one of the key elements that have the greatest impact on learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

If learners need 60 minutes to learn and grasp a concept or a skill, and they spend 30 minutes learning it, then they will not master that concept or skill. At most, they will learn half the content they are expected to assimilate or skills they are expected to develop. This is true in many schools.

In your school, you may be spending less time to teach than you think. That is, your school may be losing a significant amount of time as a result of:



- non-adherence to notional time allocation prescribed in the curriculum
- learner and teacher poor attendance
- learner and teacher late coming
- teachers leaving school early for a variety of reasons including attending union meetings and memorial services, memorial and personal reasons, and cultural and sporting events
- teachers and learners returning to class late after break or down-time between lessons
- poor time management for the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)
- early commencement of mid-year and end-of-year examinations



Wasted or lost time does add up. A school that loses as little as five minutes of instructional minutes per day due to inefficiencies, wastes 17 hours or two and half days of opportunity over the course of a 200-day school year.

There is a close match between time that teachers and learners actually spend at school by the end of each academic year (*implemented time*) and the allocated time in the school calendar (*planned time*). At the outset, the high-performing schools, also



called “schools that work,” do not have more teaching time than other schools. However, because they guard teaching time jealously, by the end of the school year, learners in these schools are exposed to more learning opportunities owing to minimal time losses.

STRATEGIES TO MAXIMISE STUDENT LEARNING TIME AND MINIMISE DOWNTIME

What can other schools learn from the schools that work to help them to maximise teaching time without overloading teachers after hours?

Schools that work¹ employ different approaches as they use time to generate better performance for all learners in their classes. Three approaches which schools that work commonly use are briefly discussed below:

USE THE ALLOCATED TIME EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY

Allocated time is the total amount of time available for learning; including the length of the school day and a class period. It is the “opportunity to learn.”

High-performing schools do not have more time than other schools, but they employ an integrated series of practices to maximise the use of that time. By the end of the school year, unlike in other schools where teaching time is wasted, these schools have lost little or no teaching time.

Practices that schools that work employ to maximise the use of teaching time include the following:

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned NEEDU to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za.

NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231



- **Adhere to planned schedules**, improve teacher attendance, and build skills for effective classroom management to minimise disruptions.

In our school, we don't have scheduled morning, afternoon, weekend and holiday classes because we strongly believe that if teachers use every minute of the seven hours each day to teach, they should be able to complete the curriculum. (Principal, School GH-Quintile 5)

- **Strive to make classroom time as efficacious as possible** by managing classrooms tightly to make every minute count in order to maximise time-on-task.

You do not waste time because you are counting on providing extra time. You must use the time that you have effectively. Lost time can never be replaced; it's gone forever (Principal, School KK-Quintile 4).

- **Exercise strong internal controls and accountability**, including tight control of period registers.

Period registers are controlled by learners themselves. They check if the teachers come to class and on time. Learners are our clients and they have the right to demand that teachers do not rob them of the opportunity to learn (Teacher, School LL-Quintile 2)



MITIGATE AND MINIMISE FACTORS THAT LEAD TO LOSS OF TEACHING TIME

SMT members in high-performing schools, including those which serve large proportions of disadvantaged learners, make sure that time loss is kept to the minimum. Thus, extra time in these schools is not used to compensate for time loss.

It's our culture that you may not attend any other functions such as union meetings during school time or celebrations of any kind because we need to observe time-on-task on a daily basis. (HOD, School KH-Quintile 4)



Schools that work establish procedures and expectations that minimise wasteful downtime and maximise engaging learning opportunities. Amongst other things, these schools ...



- **Allocate sufficient time to each subject** as stipulated in the curriculum statement so that:
 - ✓ when schools re-open in January each year, correct time allocations are reflected in the timetables
 - ✓ concepts and content are covered in sufficient depth
- **Develop systems and tools to:**
 - ✓ analyse information collected through different registers or systems so that habitual late coming, early departure and poor attendance are identified quickly (at least on a weekly basis)
 - ✓ hold teachers accountable within the confines of the Employment of Educators Act
- **Develop procedures and systems to ensure that no time is lost when:**
 - ✓ periods change
 - ✓ teachers and learners return to class after break
 - ✓ NSNP meals are served
- **Follow the National Policy on Learner Attendance** by ensuring that:
 - ✓ teaching is not suspended early to commence early for mid-year and end-of-year examinations
 - ✓ they adhere to paragraph 16 of the Policy which states that “Except for Grade 12, a learner may not take leave from school to study for examinations or when examinations have ended.”



CREATE MORE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNERS

In any class, learners do not learn at the same pace. It is for this reason that some learners need more time than others to learn. Because this, in reality, does not always fit the time

allocated to different subjects as prescribed in CAPS, teachers tend to "aim for the middle." That is, they teach in a way that will work for most learners—to the exclusion of struggling or lagging learners and gifted learners.

On the contrary, teachers in schools that work:



- Volunteer substantial amounts of personal time to the school because they feel strongly that their work requires more time than is available during the traditional work day
- Believe that extra time would make a significant difference for every learner, but particularly learners who are struggling or lagging behind



Purpose for extending allocated time:

Learning opportunities in schools that work seek to:

Provide a means of reaching learners which regular [school-time] programs are not effectively serving and can be beneficial in schools' efforts to narrow achievement gaps and guide at-risk learners to succeed academically. (Teacher, School EF-Quintile 3)

The extension of the planned or allocated time in high-performing schools can be categorised into six purposes to:

- Complete the curriculum
- Give more support to struggling or lagging learners
- Re-inforce what was taught in class
- Do remedial work
- Revise or catch-up
- Build in opportunities for teacher development and collaboration

Each purpose is briefly discussed below:

- **To complete the curriculum:** “We spend three hours every Saturday trying to finish the syllabus alone because it is so extensive.” (Teacher, School KS-Quintile 4)





- **To give more support to struggling or lagging learners:** Teachers use additional time to focus on individual learners who are struggling or who need extra help and provide a vehicle for teamwork to strengthen their performance early, before educational problems increase in intensity.
- **To re-inforce what was taught in class:** “You can’t find time during school working hours to cover the breadth and scope of the curriculum. This is where providing extra time becomes unavoidable.” (School KW-Quintile 2)
- **To do remedial work:** “As I present a lesson in class, I can tell by the look on some learners’ faces that they are lost. But if I have to stop and attend to them to bring them on board, I will derail the rest of the class. This is when I use additional time to help these learners.” (Teacher, School KF-Quintile 4)
- **To catch-up or revise:** It is unavoidable that teachers would miss some of their classes owing to many reasons such as illness, attending workshops, union meetings and memorial services. When time is lost, teachers use extra classes as catch-up sessions.
- **To build in more opportunities for teacher development and collaboration:** Because teachers have little time outside their classroom activities to prepare for their lessons, they use increased school time for teacher collaboration.



Time is a precious commodity for teachers. Most teachers would argue that they never have enough time to reach every learner, particularly the ones that are below grade level. This is why they extend teaching time.

How extended time is used: All schools emphasise that providing extra time is not done as a matter of routine. These schools also strongly believe that just adding more school time will not make a difference in learning outcomes unless the added time is used well. A teacher in a high-performing school cogently argues that:

You can add as much extra teaching time as you like, but if the quality of teaching is poor, extra time will not lead to achievement gains. (Teacher, School LM-Quintile 2)

Schools use extra time for a variety of reasons, including the following:



- **Tracking learners:** Through this approach, teachers vary their approaches when teaching learners in separate groupings.
- **Differentiated instruction:** Extra time gives teachers block time to differentiate their classes in ways that enable struggling learners to receive extra support, while gifted learners are kept challenged.
- **Study time and homework:** Some schools provide the space and supervision for learners to study and do homework at school because they know that their home circumstances would not allow for this.



CONCLUSION

By far, the most common characteristic of the high-performing schools is effective use of teaching time.

Demand from schools increase, and national as well as public expectations rise, but the hours in a day remain the same. This is a systemic problem in many education systems all over the world, but there are reasonable and realistic actions that can be taken by schools to eliminate activities that do not honour the value of a teaching time.

RECOMMENDATION

Discussed in this advocacy brief are different approaches how high-performing schools use time to generate better performance for *all* learners in their classes. Schools should consider these approaches if they are to generate real and lasting improvements in learning outcomes.

