

Beyond the Numbers: Tackling teacher absenteeism through smart support, not blame



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In 2025, a report noted that Namutumba district faced high teacher absenteeism and alleged recruitment of incompetent teachers.

Such reports have a way of alarming the public, and suggest that teachers are not held accountable. Now, as the academic year 2026 draws closer, the reality about teacher absenteeism in Uganda is more complex than a single statistic.

Teacher absenteeism is real and negatively affects learning outcomes. However, focusing solely on absences or labelling teachers as “incompetent” oversimplifies the problem and ignores systemic factors.

Many rural teachers manage classrooms of 70 or more learners, lack staff accommodation, face overwhelming workloads, and receive minimal supervision. These structural barriers, not personal negligence, often underlie poor performance.

Concerns about “incompetent teachers” often reflect gaps in teacher preparation rather than unwillingness. Shaming teachers does not improve performance; instead structured coaching, mentoring, ongoing professional development, and supportive working conditions do.

The Inspect & Improve (I&I) Programme model provides a practical blueprint. Since

2019, Promoting Equality in African Schools, in partnership with the Directorate of Education Standards, has piloted and scaled a school inspection and improvement approach across many government secondary schools.

In a 2019–2021 pilot of 10 schools in Eastern Uganda, 88 per cent of school leaders reported improvements in leadership and management, while around 70 per cent observed better teaching quality, teacher and student attendance, and student safety.

These findings were reported by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) based on the evaluation of ten government secondary schools in Eastern Uganda.

Following the pilot, the I&I Programme has expanded to more than 200 rural government secondary schools across Uganda, including Western and northern Uganda regions. Results show that disadvantaged students, often starting behind, make faster learning progress and achieve higher exam results. With the model, gains are driven by daily presence tracking, routine classroom observations, instructional coaching, continuous professional

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development, structured schemes of work, and peer learning communities. Attention to welfare such as manageable workloads, accommodation, and supportive school cultures, reduces absenteeism because teachers feel valued.

Although data is not disaggregated by region, the Eastern pilot and nationwide expansion indicate that systemic support, rather than blame, drives better attendance, pedagogy, and the quality of school leadership.

These lessons are directly applicable to Namutumba and other rural districts.

What Uganda needs is systems thinking, not finger-pointing. Support-based accountability, strong instructional leadership, effective school improvement and support approaches, teacher development pipelines, and better working conditions are critical.

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The conversation should shift from why are teachers absent to when will we adopt systems that help them stay present, motivated, and effective?

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