

By Charles Kakamwa

The Government is set to introduce biometric machines at schools and health facilities to monitor staff attendance, in an attempt to reduce absenteeism.

The system will be tested in schools and health units in 20 focus districts where a project to improve teacher and health worker attendance is being piloted by the Government, through the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU).

The machines that will be procured with the assistance of the Department for International Development (DFID), are expected by the end of May this year, former finance minister Dr. Ezra Suruma, who heads the PMDU, said on Wednesday.

"With these machines, we hope to achieve improved staff attendance and also be able to validate data," he said.

He was speaking during a PMDU regional stakeholders meeting, attended by political and technical staff from the 20 districts at the Civil Service College in Jinja district.

Prime Minister Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda said the biometric machines would go a long way in solving absenteeism in the public sector.

"It is good DFID is giving us biometric machines so that we can have concrete evidence on absenteeism."

It is going to be a motivator because you cannot be away anyhow when you are monitored," he said.

He warned that whereas previously teachers and health workers would sign attendance books on behalf of their absentee colleagues, this cannot be applicable with biometrics.

Rugunda said apart from biometrics, the involvement of other stakeholders, like the community members, the Police, and bodaboda riders

Schools, hospitals to get biometric machines



Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda hands over a certificate to Pallisa district leaders, led by the chairman, John Okurut. Photo by Charles Kakamwa

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also helps in curbing the vice. According to Suruma, the PMDU was established following a June 2015 directive by President Yoweri Museveni to the cabinet to 'decisively' improve service delivery in the health and education sectors.

In October 2015, the Government established the delivery unit to foster faster and better delivery of services in priority areas.

The objectives included improving the quality of education and access to health

services in health centres.

An inter-ministerial task force selected 20 districts that performed poorly in the Primary Leaving Examination 2015 to pilot the project, which is hoped to be rolled out to cover the entire country.

Curbing teacher absenteeism was identified as the most immediate means to improve the quality of education in Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools.

The districts are Bukwo, Kween, Bududa, Bulambuli, Serere, Sironko, Buyende, Namutumba, Buvuma, Bugiri,

Mbale, Kaliro, Kayunga, Mayuge, Soroti, Tororo, Manafwa, Pallisa, Luuka and Kapchorwa with a total population of about six million people.

Suruma reported that through the teacher absenteeism monitoring system that was developed, absenteeism had reduced tremendously in the last 13 months.

In Pallisa and Serere, teacher absenteeism reduced to 0% by February 2018, Manafwa, Kayunga and Kween had 2% teacher absenteeism while

Kaliro, Bugiri and Mbale which had the highest rates, ranged between 12 and 14%.

"In the health facilities, attendance rose from 79% in January 2017 to 88% in February 2018," he said.

Districts used sanctions, including issuing warning letters, deletion from payroll, interdiction and dismissal, while those that adhered to good practices were rewarded with certificates of recognition, gifts, handshakes and promotions.

Joseph Odit Okoko, the Serere LC5 chairperson, said the district formed an education improvement task force through which they visited all schools and met with classroom teachers, excluding headteachers and deputies.

"We were able to hear firsthand the challenges of classroom teachers," he said, adding that other drivers to success, included display of teachers attendance lists on noticeboards, provision of accommodation, elimination of politicking and involvement of various stakeholders in monitoring attendance of teachers.

He, however, asked the Government to enhance the wage bill to enable them recruit more teachers and also review education policies on thematic curriculum and automatic promotion.

Sarah Kasewa, the Kaliro district health officer, said introduction of attendance registers at health units and strict monitoring was key in addressing absenteeism.

The state minister for local government, Jennifer Namuyangu, stressed the need to appoint substantive officers, saying many districts still have people in acting capacities.

Rugunda commended delivery associates which is funded by DFID and IntraHealth, both development partners, for supporting the programme.