

World Bank survey highlights teachers' absenteeism

New Delhi - A World Bank survey has found that 25 percent schoolteachers in India are missing from work, thus leaving a gap in the government's attempt to deliver primary education to all.

'Twenty-five percent of government primary school teachers in India are absent from work. Only 50 percent of teachers are actually engaged in the act of teaching while at work,' according to the World Bank study report released Monday.

The survey is part of a broader World Bank research project on absenteeism, which set out to measure how widespread the problem is in six countries, namely Bangladesh, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Peru and Uganda.

Survey teams paid unexpected visits to random primary schools and health clinics. They recorded that on average 19 percent of teachers and 35 percent of health workers weren't at work on the surveyed day in the six countries.

'These statistics represent average numbers taken across many states. The numbers are not so harsh across all of India and several Indian states fare much better,' the report states.

The researchers found that the teachers and health workers are extremely unlikely to be fired for absence as only one in 3,000 head teachers had ever fired a teacher for repeated absence.

On the reason for so little monitoring, Halsey Rogers, senior economist with the World Bank's Development Research Group, says: 'In some cases, it's just difficult to monitor.'

At a conference on the results in India, Roger learnt from a high-ranking official in the health ministry from one of the poorer states that besides the cost involved in monitoring, there is the fear factor. 'The crime rates are too high.'

In other cases, Rogers says, local communities monitor poor performance by teachers and health workers but lack the power to make them perform better.

The study by researchers at the World Bank and Harvard University found better pay also doesn't lower absenteeism.

Older teachers, more educated teachers and head teachers have better salaries but are also absent frequently, according to a related research paper.

Contract teachers, paid much less than regular teachers, have similar absence rates.

Absenteeism among teachers and medical personnel is widely cited in development literature as a barrier to improving education and health levels in developing countries.

Developing countries often spend 80 percent to 90 percent of their education budgets on teachers, without getting the most basic of returns - getting teachers to show up to work.

'Working conditions are more likely to influence teachers' absenteeism than fear of losing pay,' the

report states.

(© IANS / India eNews)