

TTUTA ON TUESDAY

Teacher Absenteeism: another look

TIME AND time again the issue of teacher absenteeism has been highlighted as one of the major contributors to school violence and student indiscipline, especially in our secondary schools.

While there is merit in this statement, one must be careful to examine the reasons why teachers are absent from school or are present in school but not in their respective classrooms. Indeed, the picture that is being painted gives a distorted perspective on the issue and places the blame unfairly on the shoulders of teachers.

It is a fact that students engage in nefarious activities when unsupervised and it is therefore important to understand the circumstances under

which students remain unsupervised during the course of the school day.

Vacant positions

In many of our secondary schools there are positions that have been vacant for extended periods (years in some cases), especially in the specialised areas such as technical vocational education and visual and performing arts.

In many instances, schools have had to cease offering some subjects owing to the unavailability of teachers. The pace with which some vacancies are filled can sometimes be extremely slow even though there is a long waiting list of available applicants. Principals are left with their hands virtually tied and can only try to de-

ploy existing staff to carry out supervision duties if their teaching schedules permit.

Acting appointments

When principals and vice principals proceed on vacation leave during the school term, people from lower ranks (teachers) are "promoted" to perform their duties, without the corresponding replacements in the classroom.

In addition, when people are promoted or retire, acting arrangements can remain in place for months, even years, impacting negatively on the classroom. Hopefully, the substitute teacher programme will help to address this problem.

Planned absences

Very often teachers are required to attend meetings, conferences and workshops organised by the Ministry of Education. Many precious contact hours are lost in this manner and despite complaints from teachers and administrators, the practice contin-

ues.

Frequently, notifications to attend these meetings come from the ministry one or two days prior to the event and this makes it very difficult for administrators to organise alternative teaching and supervision arrangements.

Field trips

When students have to be taken out of school for field trips or to participate in competitions, one or more teachers are required to accompany them. This means that the classes they teach will have to be "supervised" even though "work" would have been left for the students. Again, principals are hard-pressed to send students out of school given this reality, especially if the school does not have its full complement of staff.

Sick/occasional leave

While it is true that teachers, like all other public servants, have at their disposal 14 sick and 14 occasional days they can use at their discretion, in fact, most teachers do not exhaust their full quota as is commonly insinuated by many commentators in their attempts

to make sensational headlines.

A common reality is that teachers have to use their occasional days to visit the ministry in Port of Spain to access simple services. This is the reality of the centralised administrative arrangements of the ministry. Simple issues such as requests for salary deductions or the status of increments requires teachers to make the trek into Port of Spain during work hours.

The statistics will show that there are a small percentage of teachers who admittedly "abuse" their leave privilege. This is, however, a leadership and management issue and there are legal guidelines (circulars) for principals to follow in treating with these situations.

Low teacher commitment and morale are very often the sources of this problem. They usually stem from poor efficacy and/or personal issues and are a function of school leadership. School management practices such as teacher leadership and mentoring programmes, clinical supervision, instructional leadership and the creation of a professional learning community can be useful approaches in reducing such abuse and building teacher commitment.

The fact of the matter is that the Ministry of Education is a major contributor to the problem of teacher absenteeism, by admission or omission, and officials and commentators would do well to engage in more in-depth analysis of the problem, before making sensational statements to an unsuspecting public.

These statements do not serve to inspire the thousands of teachers who work diligently, sometimes under unacceptable conditions or outside of school hours to complete curricula and mark papers.

Unfortunately owing to the negative stigmatisation associated with mental health, too many people, including highly qualified professionals, fail to take adequate steps to safeguard their mental health until it's too late.