

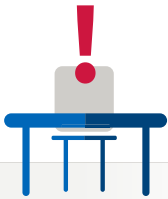


# School Absenteeism Needs Immediate Attention

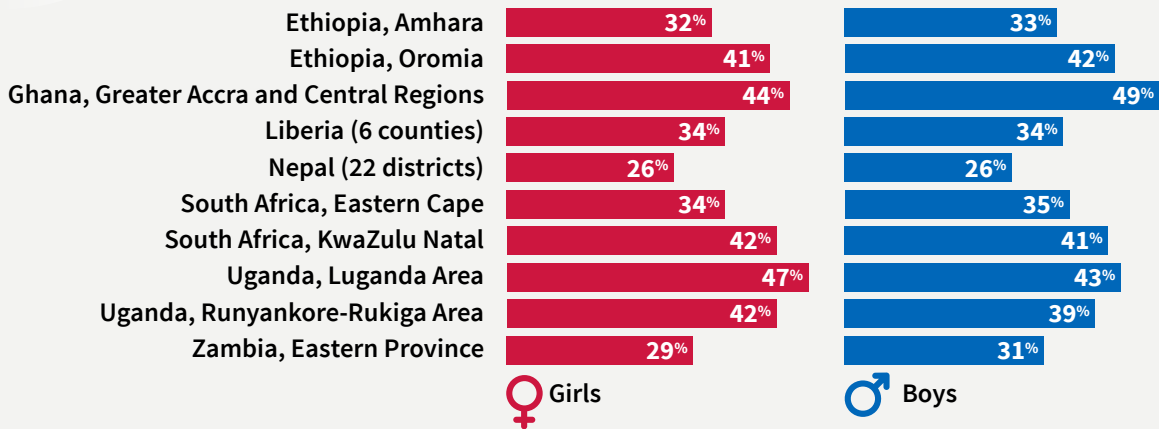
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## Background

Over the past decades, primary school enrollment substantially increased in most low- and middle-income countries; however, school absenteeism is pervasive. As part of multiple evaluations of early grade reading programs, NORC collected self-reported absenteeism data from students. The fraction of students who missed at least one day of school in the previous week is high in all geographic areas where we conducted evaluations (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Percentage of Students that Missed at Least One Day of School in Week Prior to the Interview**

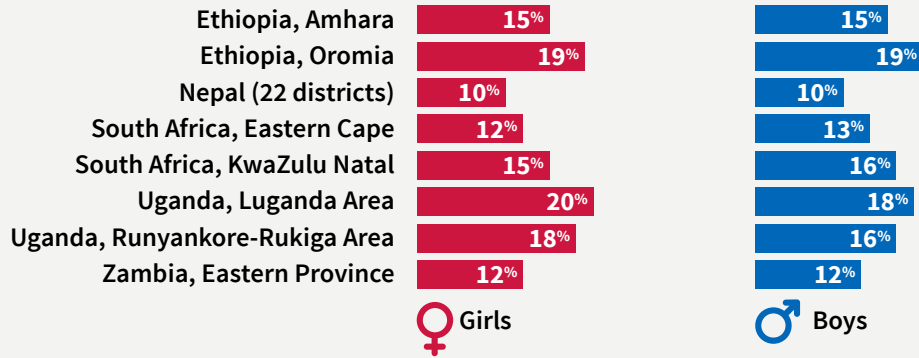


**Between a quarter and half of the students missed at least one day of school the week prior to the interview**

For some of these countries, we also have information about the number of days students were absent from school in the previous week. This information allows us to compute the student’s average daily absenteeism rate, defined as the percentage of school days that an average student is absent per week. For example, in South Africa’s KwaZulu Natal Province the absenteeism

rate is **15 percent**, as shown in Figure 2 below. Over a school year, these absenteeism rates **imply missing many school days**. In South Africa’s KwaZulu Natal Province the 15 percent weekly rate translates into the average student being absent 30 out of the 199 school days per year.

**Figure 2: Students Absenteeism Rate**



Note: Calculated as  $r = m / (s * 5)$ , where r is the absenteeism rate, m is the total number of days students missed class the previous week, and s is the total number of students.

## Absenteeism rates are similar for boys and girls

**Students are not the only ones missing school. Teachers’ self-reports indicate very high teacher absenteeism rates as well.** The teacher absenteeism rate shows the percentage of days that teachers are absent from school the week prior to data collection (Figure 3). Teachers’ own reports are likely to be a lower bound for their actual absenteeism, underestimating the real rates. Nevertheless, these rates indicate that the average teacher in Uganda’s Luganda area, for example, misses 10.3 percent of school days in each week. This translates into being absent 18 out of 180 school days per year.

## Around one in three teachers reported being absent at least one day in the week prior to the interview



**Figure 3: Teachers Absenteeism Rate**



**Combining students' and teachers' absenteeism rates** allows us to estimate the effective attendance rate, which is the percentage of days that both the teacher and student are present in the school.

## The probability of having the teacher and the student in school simultaneously is low

**Figure 4. Effective Attendance Rate (Percentage of Days that Both Student and Teacher are in the School)**



Note: Calculated as the product of the attendance rates of teachers and students.

**Figure 5 draws a comparison between the total number of official (planned) school days in each country and effective school days. Days of effective attendance are the estimated number of days when the teacher and student are both in the school.** For example, in the Oromia region in Ethiopia, the official number of school days is 175; however, given that the effective attendance rate for this region is 75 percent, it follows that there are only 131 effective school days and 44 days are missed. Further exacerbating the problem of absenteeism, it is common for students to miss the first days of the school year and schools frequently cancel classes at the end of the academic year for various reasons, such as sports week or exam week for students in the highest grades. This is a well-known occurrence among education researchers, and best practices dictate avoiding data collection in schools during the first two and the last two weeks of each school term. Conservatively assuming two weeks of school (10 school days) are lost, one at the beginning and one end of every year, we show the net number of effective school days in the last column of Table 5. In the case of Oromia, Ethiopia, this further reduces the number of school days to 121, which translates into a total loss of 54 school days (or 31% of planned school days) per year.

## The number of effective days of school is much lower than the number of planned school days



**Figure 5. Number of Planned School Days and Effective Attendance Days**







	 Planned school days	 Days of effective attendance	 Net days of effective attendance (effective attendance minus 2 weeks)
Ethiopia, Amhara	175	140	130
Ethiopia, Oromia	175	131	121
South Africa, Eastern Cape	199	157	147
South Africa, KwaZulu Natal	199	154	144
Uganda, Luganda Area	180	131	121
Uganda, Runyankore-Rukiga Area	180	136	126

Figure 6 shows that in theory, at the end of grade 3, students should have between 525 and 597 days of school, depending on the country; however, the actual number of schools days is much lower due to absenteeism, and it takes over four school years for the average student to reach that number of days.

**Figure 6. Expected and Actual School Days at the End of Grade 3**

	 Expected school days by the end of grade 3	 Actual school days by the end of grade 3	 School years that it takes to complete Grade 3
Ethiopia, Amhara	525	390	4.0
Ethiopia, Oromia	525	364	4.3
South Africa, Eastern Cape	597	442	4.0
South Africa, KwaZulu Natal	597	433	4.1
Uganda, Luganda Area	540	363	4.5
Uganda, Runyankore-Rukiga Area	540	378	4.3

## It takes four years or more to complete three years of school!

School enrollment has increased substantially in the last decades; however absenteeism is a severe problem in many countries. Students are missing many school days and absenteeism is positively correlated with the probability of dropping out. It is time to devote effort to the reduction of absenteeism.

**We need better data on student and teacher absenteeism to identify its causes, find solutions, and monitor its evolution.** Programs need to work with students and their families, schools, teachers, head teachers, and the education system to reduce absenteeism. Efforts should be directed at raising awareness about the importance of starting the school year on time and attending school every day, starting from early grades, and working with schools and the education system to tackle the root causes of teacher absenteeism.