

Assessment of the Effectiveness of Programs put in place to Control Students' Absenteeism in Public Day Secondary Schools in Kirinyaga County, Kenya

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Abstract

This paper assessed the effectiveness of programs put in place to curb absenteeism by learners in public day secondary schools in Kirinyaga County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population included 79 principals and 317 teachers in public secondary schools in Kirinyaga County. The researcher employed the Gay formula of 20 per cent to select a sample of 16 principals and 63 teachers. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire administered to the sampled principals and teachers. Content validity of the instrument was ascertained by expert opinion, while reliability was assessed by Cronbach coefficient alpha technique which yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.71 for the instrument. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0. Data analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0 revealed that in majority of schools affordable school levies, bursaries and spot checks and roll calls were effective in reduction of students' absenteeism. However, the study further established that guidance and counseling was not an effective intervention in addressing learner absenteeism in public day secondary schools. On the basis of the findings of this study, it is recommended that schools adhere to the fees guidelines as stipulated by the ministry of education, education stakeholders should enhance the provision of bursaries to needy students and that teachers consistently mark class registers to capture students attendance to all instructional sessions in every school day. Lastly, there is need to enhance guidance and counseling programmes in order to make them effective in addressing absenteeism among learners.

Keywords: Absenteeism, Attendance, Bursaries, Spot Checks, Roll Calls, Guidance and Counseling

INTRODUCTION

All over the world teachers, parents, educational researchers, policy makers and other education stakeholders have raised concerns pertaining to rising incidents of learner absenteeism in schools. Tanner-Smith and Wilson (2013) point out that absenteeism among high school students leads to loss of instructional time that undermines the broader goals of education such as the declared global concept of quality education for all as declared by the Jomtien Conference, the Dakar Conference and more recently affirmed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. Adiguzel and Karadaş (2013) agree with this view and add that the negative effects of learner absenteeism from school cannot be over emphasized; absenteeism is related to academic failure, dropping out of school and a propensity to engage in high-risk behaviour that lead to juvenile delinquency. Gupta and Lata (2014) observe that, since learners today are the future workforce of a nation, students' absenteeism should be accorded as a priority as it has a direct relationship

to the students' career prospects and thus influence their future. Gupta and Lata (2014) further assert that absenteeism leads to disintegration of cordial teacher-learner relationship, conducive class environment, failure in examinations and as teachers encounter difficulties in teaching groups of regular attendance and absent students. Moreover, they may have less chance to participate in co-curricular activities in school and thus develop social skills and recognize their talents. Victoria (2004) observes that learners who frequently absent themselves from school fail to develop a sense of accountability, tend to disregard the benefits of education, take school less seriously and may drop out in severe cases. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) provide a more quality perspective to learner absenteeism, noting that absenteeism leads to wastage of educational resources, time and human potential where teachers need to re-teach and individually work with the absentee students and it also takes the time of the students who regularly attend their classes. Moreover, absent students will miss the valuable information that result from discussion among peers which cannot be replicated when teachers teach absent students in isolation (Shahzada, Ghazi, Nawaz & Khan, 2011). Absenteeism has financial implications for the Government in terms of costing expenses for all the registered students. This is because the government needs to spend the same amount of money whether 100% or 85% of the students are present.

Reasons for absenteeism may differ from country to country, family to family and even individual students. According to Wimmer (2008), absenteeism is a complex concern caused by a mixture of factors, namely; mental health, medical and family problems. Other factors include difficult school environments, stressful life events, and influences from the community, socio-economic variables, and family views about education. Cook and Ezenne (2010) summarized the causes of absenteeism into four categories; home and family, School, community and personal characteristics of the learners. Further classification of factors relating to student absenteeism is found in the work of Victoria (2004) under two broad areas; family factors, personal factors and school related factors. Family and personal factors encompass the value parents place on their children's education, parental unemployment, children living in geographically remote areas and children brought up in low socio-economic background. School factors that may lead to learner absenteeism are; attractive school environment, irrelevant curriculum that is not aligned to learners' interest and experiences, unfriendly teacher-learner relationship, autocratic administrative procedures, bullying by peer students in schools. Kearney (2007) assert that stringent disciplinary procedures, irrelevant school curricula, poor learning environment, lack of attention to diversity in school, and lack of proper attendance management practices cause children to avoid classes and leave schools.

O'Dowd (2017) observes that regular school attendance is significant because of the affirmed link between attendance and attainment. Parents and guardians are legally bound to ensure that their children are not only enrolled in school but also attend school regularly. Adherence to this legal provision is a crucial strategy in ensuring that school attendance takes a holistic approach.

It is based on the good practice that schools build an all-embracing framework to guide the actions of all stakeholders to support improved school attendance. According to Wimmer (2008), schools ought to be proactive in the use of effective

strategies to contain learner absenteeism. In particular, shared vital elements in secondary schools include: a committed school leadership that prioritizes attendance, early intervention strategies to absenteeism, support for learners struggling with attendance and effective collaboration with all stakeholders. According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), some learners absent themselves from school due to factors in their physical environment such as; adverse weather conditions such as rain, strong winds, extreme heat and freezing temperatures. Punishment for absenteeism further aggravates the situation and sometimes students stay away from school altogether to avoid the sanctions associated with late arrival. Kibria (2013) mentioned of physical punishment and says that Afghanistan is one of those countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan where punishment embed negative effects on learners psyche and may predispose some leave school before completing their education level. Beside punishment, children avoid to attend classes due to fear that they will be evaluated on certain occasions such as examinations, oral presentation, and recitals in the presence of other students (Kearney, 2007). Romero and Lee (2007) touched upon the factor of ethnicity that some authors have left unexplored. In a study, he found that American Indian children had the highest absenteeism rates, while in grade 5 they recorded twice as much cases of absenteeism from school as compared to their peers belonging to other ethnic backgrounds (UNHCR, 2014).

Around the world various intervention programs were implemented to address students' absenteeism. Different countries, have employed different programs with various degrees of success, for instance, in Britain and the United States of America, attendance registers forms a basis in monitoring students' school attendance and absenteeism. According to Railsback (2004), it is important to have a clear understanding of the underlying causes of the absences before implementing any intervention measures. Sanchez (2012) contends that effective intervention strategies to address the underlying causal factors of absenteeism and truancy among the learners. In particular, strategies to counter learner absenteeism must include deterrence and intervention undertakings in four key areas, namely; the student, parent/guardian and family, school or community, and the legal framework. Additionally, studies by Attendance Works (2014) established that close monitoring is essential so as to permit for early intervention as soon as it has been known that a student is truant. It was further established that working individually with the affected learner with a view to provide coaching/goal setting, home visit to the learners' parents/guardians, conducting meetings with the student and focus groups discussions with truant students are important elements in establishing the root causes of absenteeism. A similar study by Virginia Department of Education (2005) underscored the importance of parental involvement in addressing issues related to students' school absenteeism because it furnishes parents with information on how they can work closely with schools to support their children attend school regularly. It is therefore imperative that any measures to deter students absenteeism should recognize parents as major stakeholders; this includes providing information to parents on the importance of attending school, either one-on-one through home visits or during parent meetings. In this regard, there is need to provide training and support, to families of chronically absent students. Shahzada et al. (2011) argue that learners' feeling about their school represents the concept of 'school attachment'. The learning atmosphere and discipline policies contribute significantly to learners' school

attachment. Thus, ensuring that students feel accepted supported and appreciated by peers, teachers, all players in a school increase their attachment to their school (Virginia Department of Education, 2005). Turner (2002) argues that although truancy and absenteeism from school is not technically a criminal issue, the juvenile justice system in any country can be invoked to address cases of chronic learner absenteeism. Courts can order children and their parents to comply with the government's legal provisions on compulsory school attendance. In agreement to this view, Nicholas (2014) points out that in direct relationship to the child-labour law courts can compel parents requiring children to attend school regardless of parents' support to education.

Simons, Hwang, Fitzgerald, Kielb & Lin, (2010) is of the view that the state of the physical environment in a school can be modified to reduce students' absenteeism rates. In this respect, school buildings should be suitably established and furnished to be friendly for all learners. The social amenities, aesthetics, planning, classrooms, playgrounds, footpaths, furniture and fixtures, should all strongly identify with the learners basic comfort and sense of pride in their school. Shahzada et al. (2011) concur with this view and add that schools should provide adequate libraries, health facilities, facilities of co-curricular activities and above all a relevant and learner-centred curriculum, noting that students need to be provided with interesting learning experiences such as field trips, the use of films, television, radio and any other audiovisual aids. Spradlin, Cierniak, Shi and Chen (2012) proposed the importance of a partnership between the families, community in order to curb learner absenteeism and improve school to attendance. They impressed the need for careful monitoring of absenteeism through institutions and families to assess the needs of students and initiate proper interventions. Incentives and rewards have proved instrumental in regulating students' attendance. They call for efforts to be made at the national level to sensitize and create awareness on the detrimental effects of learner absenteeism from school, suction absenteeism, set attendance targets, provide motivation and rewards for attendance, involve parents and partner with community agencies to improve students' school attendance.

Borrowing from the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Cook and Ezenne (2010) proposes the establishment of school feeding programmes as a means of reducing students' absenteeism, arguing that in some schools, learners have to make do without 10.00 o'clock tea and lunch makes the hunger drive stimulus a compelling drive for learners to be away from school. In agreement with this view, Spradlin et al (2012) assert that schools should collaborate with all stakeholders in order to provide a friendly and engaging learning environment to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds such as orphans, learners from poor backgrounds, learners with learning difficulties, learners from broken families, among others to facilitate the students regularly attend school. Kearney (2007) suggests that disparities in students social economic backgrounds, school programs should be arranged to cater for the students' diversity, teachers should be proficient to support vulnerable and children who are at risk of absenteeism and provide them individual instruction to better meet their academic needs.

Barlow and Fleischer (2011) say that schools should provide students with clear policies and guidelines of administrative expectations and their responsibility to prepare and participate in school activities, the importance of good academic performance and the role of social skills in the learners' life. Britain has

implemented the use of electronic systems to capture information on students' biographical, academic, behavior and attendance and in efficient and reliable ways. Staffordshire Education Department Policy (2001) recommends that registers must be marked for authorized and unauthorized absence as well as partial or full absence. Registers have been upgraded to legal documents and it has been made compulsory for all schools to keep and update attendance and admission registers. Mboweni (2014) observes that in South Africa, an integral part of classroom instruction is monitoring of learner absenteeism through consistent analysis of class attendance registers. The registers capture the learners' class attendance in the morning and afternoon sessions, learners' grades, admission number and reasons for absenteeism. This monitoring of learner absenteeism is not conducted by a regular classroom teacher but by specially trained and appointed personnel to check and deal with learner absenteeism (Mboweni, 2014).

In Kenya the Basic Education Act of 2013 part IV Sub-Section 30, emphasizes on compulsory primary and secondary education. Therefore, a parent who fails to ensure that his/her child attends school commits an offence (GoK, 2013). The Act also emphasizes the role of a school head in ensuring that learners are in school. In cases where a learner fails to attend school, the head teacher is compelled to investigate the circumstances of the learner's absenteeism. In Kenya, the use of attendance registers to monitor school attendance is commonly used in schools; registers are legal documents which are supposed to be marked in the morning and afternoon sessions MoEST (2015). However, despite the registers being legal, MoEST observed that many teachers fail to update the registers on a daily basis while in extreme circumstances, the class prefects are bestowed with the responsibility of updating the students' attendance register. Oluach and Aladwa (2015) found out that school heads did not consistently supervise the updating of students' attendance registers and this led to inaccuracies in the data captured on students' school attendance. The Kenya Government has invested heavily in monetary and human capital in provision of free secondary and primary education; however, the intended goals of this noble endeavour may be compromised if the learners fail to consistently attend schools. Additionally, limited empirical studies have been conducted in Kenya on effectiveness of strategies that have been enacted to address learner absenteeism in school; consequently, the government's acclaimed goal of provision of quality in secondary education may not be realized against a background of declining learner school attendance. Despite the centrality of school attendance to achievement of educational goals, limited studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of programs put in place to control students' absenteeism in public day secondary schools in Kirinyaga County.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of programs put in place to control students' absenteeism in public day secondary schools in Kirinyaga County. This study adopted a descriptive research design to collect data in Kirinyaga County, Kenya. The target population included 79 principals and 317 teachers in public secondary schools in the four sub counties, namely; Kirinyaga East (20), Kirinyaga West (18), Kirinyaga Central (19) and Kirinyaga South (22). The researcher employed the Gay formula of 20 per cent to select a sample from 16 principals and 63 teachers. Data for the study was collected by means of a

questionnaire administered to the sampled principals and teachers. The questionnaire consisted of eight items in a five point likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Content validity of the instrument was ascertained by expert opinion, while reliability was achieved through a test-retest technique. Cronbach coefficient alpha was computed to establish the reliability of the instrument which yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.71 which was greater than 0.7 and was thus acceptable (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0. The findings of the study were presented in tables, charts and graphs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study identified various policies and programs implemented in educational institutions to address student absenteeism in public day secondary schools in Kirinyaga County. These are discussed as follows:

a) Subsidized school fees to address student absenteeism

The respondents were asked if in their opinion the secondary schools charged affordable schools fees. The responses of the teachers and the principals are presented in Figure 1.

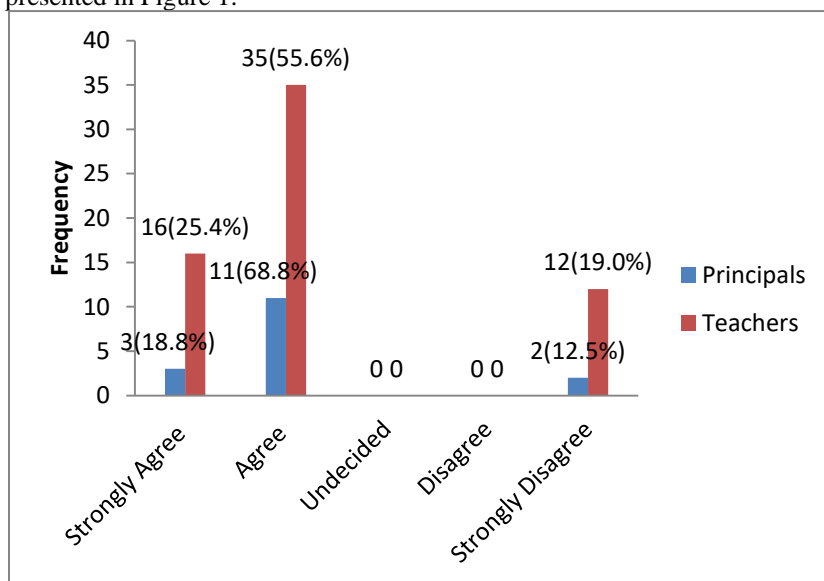


Figure 1: Subsidized School Fees to address Student Absenteeism

Analyzed data presented in Figure 1 shows that 11(68.8%) of the principals and 35(55.5%) of the teachers agreed, 16(25.4%) of the teachers and 3(18.8%) of the principals strongly agreed, lastly 12(19.0%) of the teachers and 2(12.5%) of the principals strongly disagreed that schools in Kirinyaga County charged affordable school fees which were intended to reduce the student absenteeism rates. This indicates that the respondents were largely of the opinion that secondary schools in the county charged relatively affordable school fees. Accordingly, majority of the parents could afford to pay the stipulated levies required by schools. In this regard inability of parents to raise the stipulated school fees was unlikely to be a

contributing factor to student absenteeism. This concurs with the MoEST (2015) school fees guidelines which were enacted with the express goals of improving learner attendance, retention and completion rates in secondary schools in Kenya. Therefore, the researcher found that subsidized school fees was a strategy used in day secondary schools to boost attendance and academic performance of learners through ensuring that learning time was considerably improved through reduction of absenteeism due to lack of school fees. Kearney (2007) suggests that disparities in students social economic backgrounds, school programmes should be arranged to cater for the students' diversity, teachers should be proficient to support vulnerable and children who are at risk of absenteeism and provide them individual instruction to better meet their academic needs.

b) Government Bursaries

The respondents were asked to comment on provision of government bursaries to needy learners as a strategy to reduce learner absenteeism and general academic performance in secondary schools. The findings are presented in Figure 2

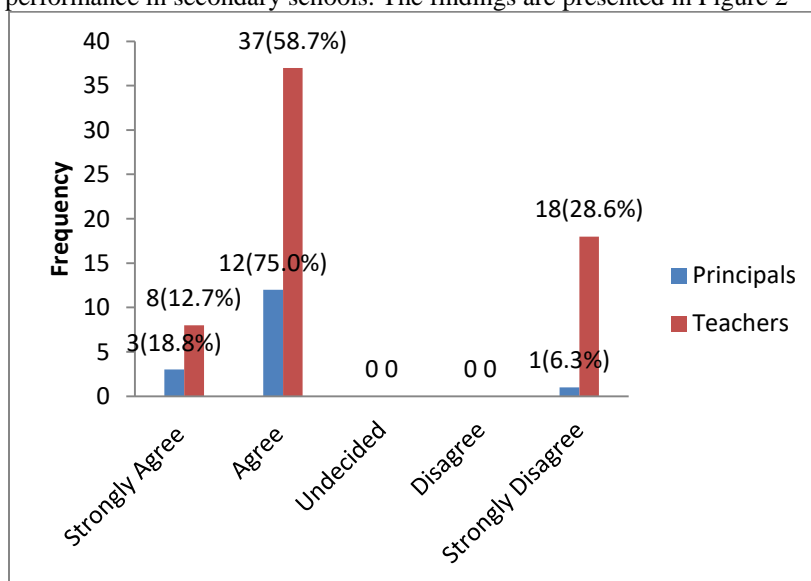


Figure 2: Government Bursaries

Figure 2 shows that majority 12(75.0%) of the principals and 37(58.7%) of the teachers agreed that the government bursaries assisted needy learners in day secondary schools and therefore reduced incidences of absenteeism that would result from lack of school fees. This was followed by 3(18.8%) of the principals and 8(12.7%) of the teachers who strongly agreed. Lastly, 1(6.3%) of the principals and 18(28.6%) of the teachers strongly disagreed. The study revealed that government school fees bursary was an effective strategy in increasing learner attendance and boost academic performance of the learners. This is in agreement with Ubogu (2004) who argued that in majority of Sub-Saharan Africa, governments give education bursaries with the intention of improving access to education and boost academic performance of learners from poor backgrounds. The study further agrees with Cook and Ezenne (2010) and Spradlin et al (2012) who

propose that poverty could be a major impediment to regular school attendance and thus the need proposes for government bursaries for learners from low social economic status. They assert the view that schools should collaborate with all stakeholders to provide a friendly and engaging learning environment to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds such as orphans, learners from poor backgrounds, learners with learning difficulties, learners from broken families, among others to facilitate the students regularly attend school.

c) School Spot Checks, Roll Calls and Student Attendance

The respondents were asked if carrying regular spot checks and roll calls reduced incidences of learner's absenteeism in day secondary schools. The responses of the principals and teachers are provided in Figure 3.

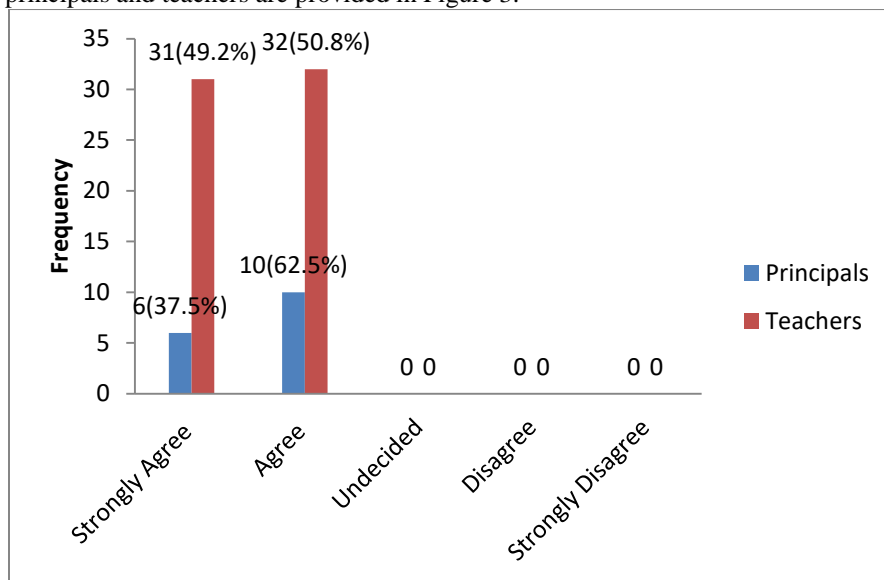


Figure 3: School Spot Checks, Roll Calls and Student Attendance

Analyzed data presented in Figure 3 shows that majority, 10(62.5%) of the principals and 32(50.8%) of the teachers agreed that carrying regular spot checks and roll calls reduced incidences of learner's absenteeism in schools. This was followed by 6(37.5%) of the principals and 31(49.2%) of the teachers who strongly agreed. Generally, the findings indicate that all the teachers and principals were in agreement that conducting regular spot checks and roll calls was an effective strategy in reducing incidents of learner's absenteeism in schools. This concurs with Uboga (2004) who noted that when schools carry out regular roll call it acts as a deterrent for learners from sneaking out of school without permission. The study established that the class attendance register was a tool used to address learner absenteeism in Kirinyaga County. MoEST (2015) noted that the class registers were an important tool for education administrators in identifying and addressing learner absenteeism in schools. The researcher agrees that regular checking and analysis of learner attendance is a strategy that could be used to identify and address learner absenteeism in schools. The findings of this study concur with Mboweni (2014) and Staffordshire Education Department Policy (2001) who observed that class register is an effective instrument for monitoring learner absenteeism through consistent marking and analysis of student attendance of

instructional sessions in a school day. The registers capture, the learners' class attendance in the morning and afternoon sessions, learners grades, admission number and reasons for absenteeism. This monitoring of learner absenteeism is not conducted by a regular classroom teacher but by specially trained and appointed personnel to check and deal with learner absenteeism (Mboweni, 2014).

C) Guidance and Counseling and learner absenteeism from School

The respondents were asked if guidance and counseling was a strategy applied in schools to address learner absenteeism. The findings are presented in Figure 4

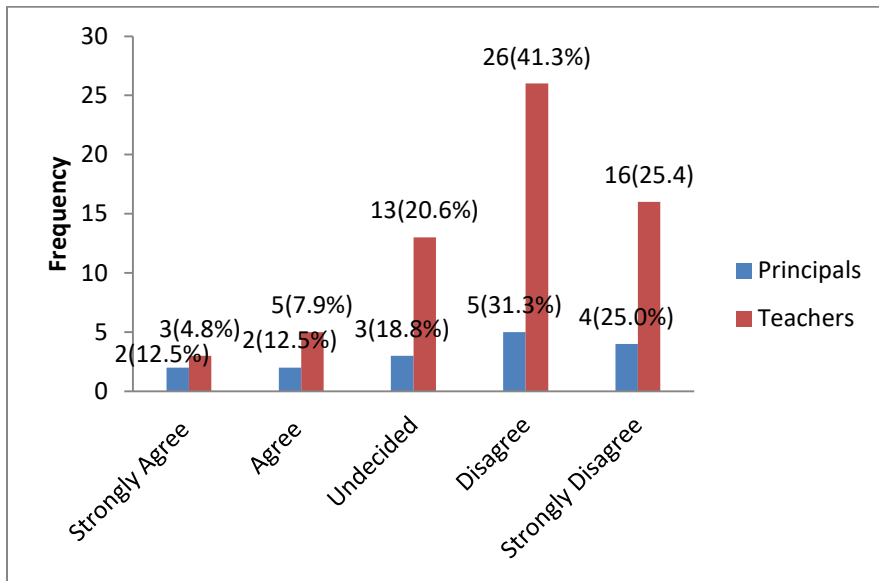


Figure 4: Guidance and Counseling and School Absenteeism

Data analysis provided in Figure 4 showed that majority (26, 41.3%) of the teachers and 5(31.3%) of the principals disagreed that guidance and counseling was an effective strategy in addressing learner absenteeism. This was followed by 16(25.4%) of the teachers and 4(25.0%) of the principals who strongly disagreed, 13(20.6%) of the teachers and 3(18.8%) of the principals were not sure, 5(7.9%) of the teachers and 2(12.5%) of the principals agreed, lastly, 3(4.8%) of the teachers and 2(12.5%) of the principals strongly agreed. On a general scale, it is evident that teachers and principals had little regard for guidance and counseling as a strategy of combating students' absenteeism in school. The findings of this study are at variance with MoEST (2015) which asserted that absenteeism was a contribution of learners' deliberate effort to skip school and could thus be reduced through guidance and counseling interventions. By offering guidance and counseling, teachers show the learner the need to attend classes and the link between school attendance and future career prospects.

CONCLUSION

The study established that public day secondary schools in Kirinyaga County charged relatively affordable school fees. Accordingly, majority of the parents could afford to pay the stipulated levies required by schools and therefore implementation of fees subsidizes at the school level was an effective strategy in curbing learner absenteeism in secondary schools in the county. The study revealed that provision of bursaries was an effective strategy in boosting school attendance of the learners. The study further revealed that conducting regular spot checks and roll calls in public day secondary schools was an effective strategy in reducing incidents of learners' absenteeism. In this regard, consistent marking of the class attendance register was an essential tool in addressing learner absenteeism. Lastly, the study established that guidance and counseling was not an effective strategy of combating learners' absenteeism in school.

RECOMMENDATION

On the basis of the findings of this study, it is recommended that in order to address student absenteeism in public day secondary schools, there is need to ensure that school adhere to the fees guidelines as stipulated by the ministry of education and desist from charging additional levies. Education stakeholders should enhance provision of bursaries to needy students with a view of improving consistent school attendance. The study further recommends that teachers consistently mark class registers to capture students' attendance in all instructional sessions in every school day. Lastly, there is need to enhance guidance and counseling programmes in order to make them effective in addressing absenteeism among learners in public day secondary schools in Kirinyaga County.

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