

Policy on Learner Attendance

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)



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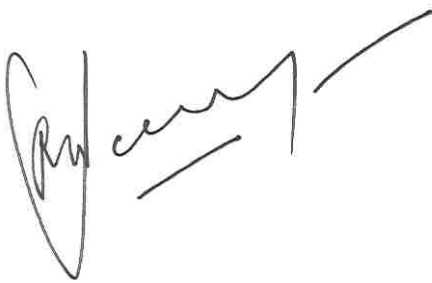
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PREFACE

These FAQs have been developed to assist schools and Provincial Education Departments in the implementation of the *Policy on Learner Attendance*.

The policy aims to promote punctual and regular school attendance and provides standardised procedures for recording and monitoring learner attendance. The policy also ensures that learners and their parents will be treated equitably across provinces.

The Department of Basic Education thanks the many officials of Provincial Education Departments who have contributed to this document.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. B. Soobrayan', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

MR PB SOOBRAYAN

DIRECTOR - GENERAL: BASIC EDUCATION

POLICY ON LEARNER ATTENDANCE

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. When was the *Policy on Learner Attendance* gazetted?

On 4 May 2010.

2. When will the policy come into effect?

On 1 January 2011.

3. What processes were followed in developing the policy and who was consulted?

*The National Education Policy Act, 1996 specifies the consultative processes that a Minister must follow before determining national policy. The decision to develop a policy was made in the Council of Education Ministers after considering a research report on **Learner Absenteeism in the South African Schooling System** (Department of Education, December 2007).*

A three-day workshop was held with principals and circuit managers in July 2008. Thereafter a draft policy was developed. The draft policy was presented to national teacher unions, the National Consultative Forum (which links stakeholder bodies with the Department of Basic Education), the South African Principals' Association (SAPA), SGB associations and relevant units within the Department of Basic Education.

The draft policy was piloted in 13 schools in KZN and Free State (April to June 2009) with the assistance of the respective PEDs. The revised draft policy was gazetted for public comments (July 2009) and was finalised with careful consideration of; findings of the pilot study, comments from the public, HODs, MECs and the Minister of Education. The Minister determined the policy with the agreement of the Council of Education Ministers.

4. Which carries more weight, the *Policy on Learner Attendance* or provincial regulations on learner attendance?

The national policy determines national norms and standards for learner attendance in public schools. Provincial policies, regulations and administrative practices on learner attendance should be consistent with the national policy on learner attendance.

5. Why is the policy applicable only to public schools?

The courts have ruled that a Ministerial policy cannot bind persons who are not public servants, so the policy can only apply to role-players who hold responsibility in the public school system. In future the Minister might make the policy applicable to independent schools as well, by means of regulations under SASA. In the mean time PEDs may advise independent schools to apply the principles and procedures of the policy on a voluntary basis.

6. Will schools get a copy of the policy?

Yes, every school will receive 2 copies of the policy; one for the principal and the other for the SGB.

7. What, if any, are the consequences for non-compliance or non-implementation of the policy?

Non-compliance or non-implementation is not an option. All public servants are required to observe the policy which has been determined by the Minister.

8. Are parents held accountable for learners not attending school?

Yes. The policy stipulates that it is the responsibility of the parent to ensure that the learner attends school daily. SASA provides for actions to be taken if a learner of compulsory school attendance age does not attend school without explanation.

9. Is the *Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools (1998)* part of the *Policy on Learner Attendance*?

No.

10. Does the policy address learners not enrolled in schools?

No. This policy addresses matters pertaining to daily attendance of learners already enrolled in schools.

11. Is the policy aligned with the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS)?

Yes, the policy is aligned with SA-SAMS. There is full provision for electronic record keeping.

12. Can the temporary class register be used for longer than 10 consecutive school days?

No. The temporary class register is used for a maximum of 10 consecutive school days, starting on the first day of the first term.

13. Will class and period registers be available to all schools ?

Some PEDs print the registers centrally and distribute directly to schools. Other PEDs provide templates to service providers and schools purchase the registers from the service providers. Either way, all schools must use the standard class and period registers with the provincial logo.

14. How should schools deal with punctuality of learners in relation to completion of the class register?

The school time-table must indicate the time when the class register will be marked (the registration period). Learners are expected to attend school on time and must be required to do so. Learners should be made aware that if they are not present during the registration period they will be marked absent. The policy specifies reasons for absence. The school policy on learner

attendance may specify disciplinary actions that will be taken against learners who are not punctual in attending school without valid reason.

15. Are schools compelled to have a class registration period at the start of the morning session? What if schools want to mark the register at 10:00?

The policy specifies that the class register must be marked at the start of the morning session. However, if it is historical practice for a school to mark the class register at 10:00, there is no particular need to change its practice. The school must do its utmost to promote and monitor punctual attendance at the start of the school day.

16. Can principals allocate the checking and signing of registers to HODs and Deputy Principals?

Yes. Subject to section 16A of SASA and section 4 of PAM, a principal may allocate a duty or responsibility envisaged in this policy to a member of staff.

17. Why does the policy stipulate that the period register be marked at a minimum once a month?

*This is a **minimum**. 'Spot checks' in each period on at least one school day a month can assist in promoting a good attendance ethos at the school. A principal may decide to check more frequently, such as once a week or even at the start of every period every school day.*

18. Is information from the class and period register consolidated to provide data on learner absentee rates?

No. Only information from the class register is used to obtain data about learner absentee rates.

19. How will information on learner absence be used?

It is used by the class teacher and principal to monitor learner attendance and follow up on learner absence. Schools also provide SGBs and district offices with quarterly reports on learner absentee rates. The SGBs and district offices must identify problem areas and determine actions that are required.

20. What is the definition of 'present' at school?

A learner is deemed to be 'present' at school when the learner is present in class or is participating in a school activity (official educational, cultural, recreational or social activity of a school within or outside the school premises) when the class register is marked.

21. For what period of time should a learner be at school in order to be marked present?

The policy does not specify how long the learner must be at school in order to be marked present. It states that the learner is marked present if the learner is in class when the class register is marked. The class register is thus the official record of learner attendance and absence. The period register is the instrument used to monitor attendance during the school day.

22. If the class register is marked twice a day, and the learner is present for part of the day only, is the learner regarded as being present or absent?

Attendance during a single registration period will result in the learner being recorded as present for the day.

23. How is the register marked if the school is temporarily closed by the HOD during protests/strikes?

If the school is temporarily closed, learners are not individually marked as being present or absent. The class teacher must write the reason for temporary closure in capital letters in the class register for the day (for example, STRIKE or FLOOD).

24. Are learners marked ‘present’ when they are absent for a valid reason?

No, they cannot be marked ‘present’ if they are not at school or not engaged in a school activity. Learners cannot be marked ‘present’ even if there is a valid reason for absence.

25. How many days may a learner be absent with valid reason?

The policy does not specify a number. The principal must decide what is reasonable in the light of the school’s policy on learner attendance.

26. How should schools avoid abuse of valid reasons for absence?

Schools must develop their own learner attendance policy, but such a policy must be consistent with the national policy and any provincial policy.

27. Death of a ‘family member’ is a valid reason for absence. Does this include extended family members?

The policy does not specify who the ‘family member’ is because circumstances vary so much. The class teacher must assess the merits of the individual case. It is important to curb abuse of this provision. Schools may wish to deal with this matter in their school policy on learner attendance.

28. How many days can a learner stay away from school for giving birth?

*The health of the mother and child are paramount in determining the number of days. This point is covered by the Department of Education’s **Measures for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy (2007)**.*

29. Is paternity leave a valid reason for absence?

The policy makes no reference to paternity leave. If the question arises in a school it must be decided in the light of the school’s policy on learner attendance, taking into account the

circumstances of the case, the need to protect the learner's right to education and the importance of encouraging responsible sexual behavior.

30. Is engagement in a youth organisations by learners a valid reason for absence?

No.

31. Are circumcision/initiation ceremonies a valid reason for absence?

It is preferable that initiation ceremonies take place during school holidays. However, if a learner is required to attend such ceremonies during term time the principal must assess the situation and decide whether to grant leave of absence because of exceptional circumstances.

32. How many days may learners be absent for religious or cultural observances?

The policy does not specify the number of days. This must be determined by the school's policy on learner attendance. The national policy refers at paragraph 13(d) to school closures for religious or cultural observances, which may be approved by an SGB for a maximum for two school days per year.

33. The policy defines valid reasons for absence. What are 'invalid reasons' for absence?

Any absence that is not valid is by definition invalid. Examples of invalid reasons for absence: (1) family holidays taken during the school term; (2) staying at home before and after exams as well as on no-examination days (unless the learner is a NSC candidate on authorised study leave in terms of the policy).

34. What happens to a learner in the case of invalid absence?

Normal disciplinary processes will apply because the school code of conduct must state that invalid absence is a disciplinary offence.

35. Does the policy specify that schools must have catch-up programmes to assist learners who are absent?

Yes. This must be reflected in the school's policy on learner attendance. The school policy must state how the school will support a learner who has been absent in order to help make up for time lost or assessments missed.

36. What is the consequence of repetitive absences?

The policy does not specify a particular consequence, but the class teacher and principal have specific follow-up duties in terms of the policy. In some cases (such as chronic illness) such absences might be valid. In other cases the learner might be bunking. A school's policy on learner attendance should take account of both possibilities. The school's responsibility is to follow up such absences and work with the parent to find a solution. The school should also engage with social agencies if circumstances warrant such action. If the learner code of conduct is being breached, disciplinary action must follow.

37. The policy says that the school principal must develop the school's learner attendance policy. Isn't this the role of the SGB?

*No. SASA specifies three policies that an SGB must develop. They do not include a policy on learner attendance. The national **Policy on Learner Attendance** requires a principal to develop the school's policy on learner attendance in consultation with the SGB. In some provinces a provincial law may require an SGB to develop a learner attendance policy. This would not be inconsistent with the **Policy on Learner Attendance**. The principal must ensure that such a policy is in place.*

38. Paragraph 53 of the policy states that a record of all communication with parents must be kept in the learner's profile. What happens in instances of child-headed households?

Communication with the learner concerned must be kept in the learner's profile.

39. Is cancellation of a learner's record in the class register the same as expulsion?

No. Cancellation of a learner's record is not expulsion. Cancellation of a learner's record is an administrative action, not a disciplinary action. It should simply be regarded as keeping the class register up to date by ensuring that learners who have been absent for more than ten continuous school days without a valid reason are not kept on the books. If a learner has committed a disciplinary offence, the school must take the necessary action, which would be quite separate from the action of keeping the correct record in the class register.

40. What processes need to be followed once a learner's record has been cancelled?

When a learner's record has been cancelled in the class register, the principal must inform the parent and class teacher of the date of and reason for the cancellation. If the learner is of compulsory school-going age, the principal must inform the district of the date of and reason for the cancellation. If the learner wants to return to school, the Admission Policy of the school will apply.

41. What happens to learners of compulsory school going age when their names are cancelled in the class register?

The school must inform the district office. The district office must determine whether the learner is registered at another school or has been exempted from compulsory attendance by the HOD or is registered for home education. If so, the HOD must include the name of the learner in the appropriate provincial register.

42. Is there a limit on the number of times a learner's record can be cancelled in the class register?

No. But if such circumstances recurred it would point to a very serious problem. The assistance of social development agencies would be indicated.

43. What are the timelines for cancelling the registration of a learner and then readmitting the learner to the same school?

The policy does not specify any timelines.

44. Will a learner whose records have been cancelled due to absence without valid reason be readmitted to the school?

The school will decide based on the school's admission policy.

45. Is there a guarantee that when a learner's record has been cancelled in the class register, the learner will be readmitted to the same school?

No. That is a matter for the school to decide in terms of its admission policy.

46. What is the appeal process once the learner's record has been cancelled?

There is no appeal process. The action of cancellation is purely administrative. If a parent feels aggrieved by the cancellation, even when the reason has been explained by the principal, the parent is free to approach the circuit or district office. This is not a matter for the SGB.

47. The policy allows Grade 12 learners to take 5 days' study leave before the start of exams. Exams start on different days, so when does the school start counting the 5 days?

Schools should count the 5 days study leave from the date announced by the Minister as the official start date of the NSC examination. This date may be after oral and practical exams have taken place.

48. Does the 5 day study leave apply to June examinations and practical exams?

No.

49. Does the policy cater for study leave for Grade 12 learners during ‘mock’¹ exams?

No. Study leave in preparation for or during ‘mock’ exams is not permitted.

50. How do you mark a Grade 12 learner when they have been given 5 days’ study leave and come to school for remedial classes?

The learner is deemed to be on study leave and the class register is not marked. If the school wishes, it could use a special attendance register for this purpose.

51. How should schools deal with accommodation or staffing issues when Grade 12 learners are writing exams?

The school must contact the district office in order to find an acceptable solution if learner attendance is likely to be disrupted by accommodation or staffing difficulties.

52. What should an SGB member do if he or she observes a learner out of school during school hours? Should they accompany the learner back to school?

The policy does not specify what an SGB member should do. SGB members are expected to support and promote punctual and regular attendance. They should at least inform the principal if a learner is observed out of school during school hours. If there is reason to believe that the absence may be without valid reason the principal must notify the parent accordingly and request that the learner return to school with an explanation for absence. School disciplinary processes might apply depending on the circumstances and the school’s policy on learner attendance.

53. The school quarterly return on learner attendance does not accommodate special schools. What should special schools do?

The PED should adjust the template for special schools where this is necessary.

¹ Also referred to as “trial exams” and “preparatory exams”

54. Will the policy be translated into other official languages?

PEDs are welcome to do so depending on their needs.