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STATE SCHOOL TEACHERS/Sue Blaine

How to help teachers get on track

SA'S BIGGEST education problem is teachers. That's a hard thing to say and it runs the risk of dismissing the efforts of the thousands of teachers who are well-qualified, dedicated and inventive. However, I cannot ignore what is glaringly obvious.

Every time I look at a problem in education — poor mathematics and science performances, poor matric marks in English as a second language, and a low matric "endorsement" rate — people in the know tell me pupils' lack of prowess has its roots in the teachers' lack of qualifications, low morale and lack of dedication.

The problem has no quick and easy solution. SA has about 350 000 teachers in the state sector. Too many of these are not good enough, for a variety of reasons.

A national survey commissioned by the Education Labour Relations Council and carried out over 18 months by a group of organisations headed by the Human Sciences Research Council showed last year that teachers have been leaving the profession in droves due to low morale, job dissatisfaction and HIV.

More than half of the 21 000-plus teachers questioned said they would favourably consider any job that offered a higher pay package

There is no doubt that state-paid

teachers' pay is low, especially for people who are expected these days to have at least a first degree. The incentive offered to those who do add to their qualifications — a once-off bonus — must seem hardly worth it.

The survey also showed teachers are spending more time keeping up with the paperwork demanded by the new outcomes-based curriculum than teaching.

As Daniela Brown, who runs SMILE, an organisation that works with teachers in seven of SA's nine provinces, says, teachers in rural schools often do not live near school and have to get up early to

take a taxi or two to work. Some even have to walk the last few kilometres.

The same return trip, plus grocery shopping, making supper and caring for their own families means they have little time left for planning lessons, even if they want to.

Many don't. They chose teaching at a time in SA's history when it was one of the few relatively well-paid jobs open to black people and because it had the

perceived bonuses of good holidays and short days.

The South African Council for Educators has, since 2001, been SA's professional body for teachers and does have some power over teachers' behaviour.

If a complaint is laid against a teacher, such as absenteeism, and the teacher is found guilty, the teacher's registration

with the council can be cancelled, precluding them from teaching.

Council director Muavia Gallie says that from last October to December, 61 complaints were laid. Of these, four were beyond the council's

jurisdiction, generally because they were about interpersonal relationships outside school, and most of the rest were about absenteeism, alcohol abuse and insubordination.

This means there are many teachers who are getting away with what amounts to murder: the murder of children's future as educated individuals.

There is enough anecdotal evidence from people who work in schools daily to

'Teachers would have to be convinced the system was there to improve their skills'

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~~prove a trend: teachers, especially in township and rural schools, are not giving their all.~~

Prof Jonathan Jansen, dean of education at the University of Pretoria, last year urged the education department to focus its spending on teacher training, good textbooks and time spent teaching. SA's pupils performed poorly compared with pupils from other developing countries, which spent less on education, Jansen told a gathering hosted by the Development Bank of Southern Africa.

Jansen says the best way to get those teachers who don't spend their time productively in class is to start a national project, with teacher unions' buy-in.

"We need to reinvent the old system of supervision and support, but it needs to be credible and staffed by capable people. Teachers would have to be convinced the supervisory system was there to help them improve their skills and support them — with policing coming second," he says.

It's an idea I like, although it brings us up against another massive hurdle — district offices would have to be staffed by competent people. Government capacity needs to be improved. It knows this and needs to do something about it.

■ *Blaine is education correspondent.*