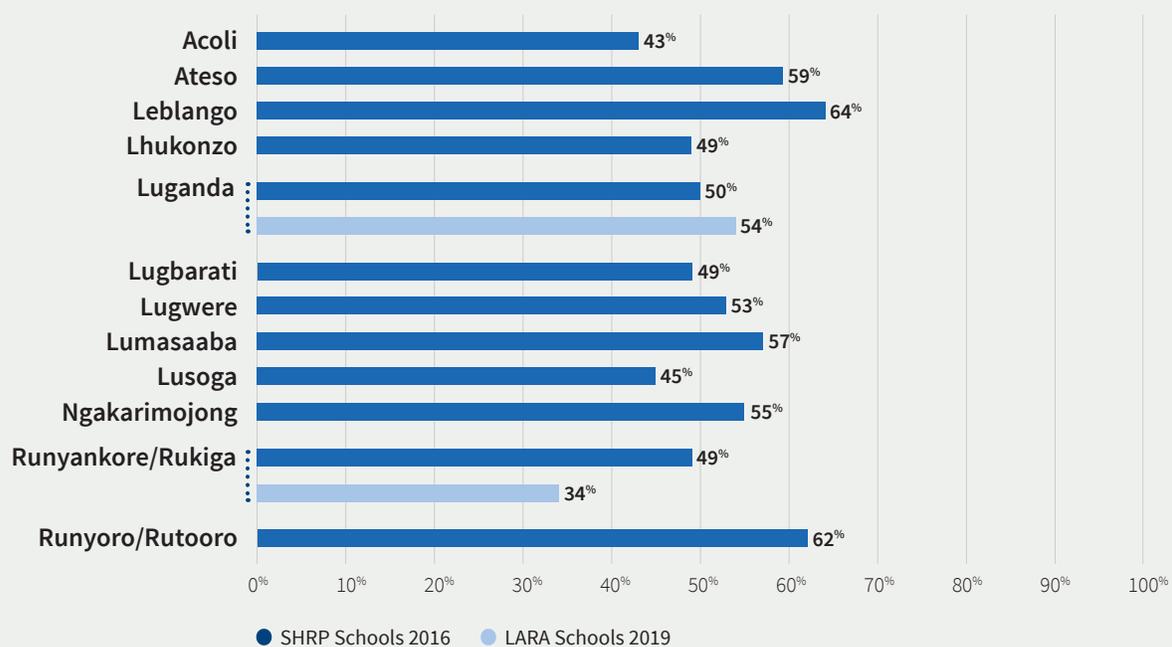




The High Absenteeism of Teachers and Learners In Uganda

Learners' and teachers' absenteeism are negatively associated with school performance. Previous work in Uganda and other countries have established this link. Learner absenteeism in Uganda is very high. Figure 1 shows the proportion of learners that reported having been absent at least one school day in the week previous to the interview by language dominant area among sample schools. The percentages of absenteeism reported are very high in all the language subgroups.

Figure 1. Percentage of learners that report being absent at least one day in the previous week, by language dominant area



SHRP and LARA schools do not overlap. Sources: Menendez (2017) and Menendez et al. (2020)¹

More than half the learners in the LARA sample that self-reported being absent in the previous week indicated that they were absent two or more days (57 and 59 percent in Luganda and Runyankore/Rukiga respectively).

¹The School Health and Reading Program (SHRP: 2012 to 2017) and the Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA: 2016 – 2021) were early grade reading programs in Uganda funded by USAID. NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) conducted the Performance and Impact Evaluations for both these programs as an external third party evaluator funded by USAID.

In addition to asking the learners about their school attendance, NORC conducted unannounced visits to schools of the LARA sample every term (there are 3 in a year) during the period 2017-2020 in the Luganda and Runyankore/Rukiga language dominant areas. Figure 2 shows the percentage of learners that were absent on the visit day by language dominant area. We found that in any given day, almost 18 percent of learners were absent. Learner absenteeism was slightly worse in the Luganda language dominant area but both regions are similar. These findings from the unannounced visits are consistent with the learners' self-reports.

Figure 2. Daily learner absenteeism



Daily absenteeism is similar for boys (18 percent) and girls (17 percent). It is also quite similar across all primary grades.

In addition to high absenteeism, it is known that many learners do not start school on the first day of classes -particularly in the first term of the year- and that in the last weeks of the year classes are interrupted by days devoted to exams and also extra-curricular activities and therefore learner's absenteeism increases. This is so common that data collection in schools is never done during the first or last weeks of the school year to avoid biased samples. This also indicates that there are behaviors regarding school attendance that are not justified by work, illness, weather, etc.

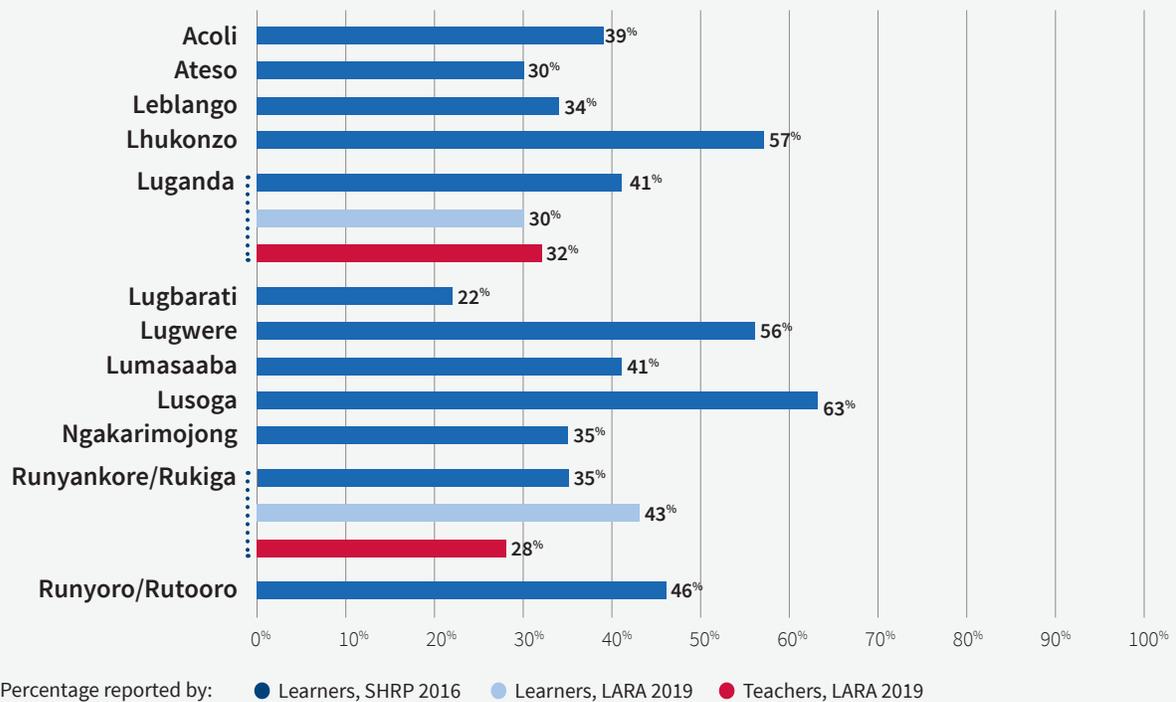
Cause of absenteeism

Learners mostly report missing school because of **illness**, followed by **needing to do work at home** and **market-day activities**. Caregivers, in contrast, mention reasons such as **children stopping on the way to school, flooded roads, lack of scholastic materials, lack of money for school fees, school climate, and teachers' absence**. Some caregivers also admit to keeping their children at home **so they can help during planting and harvesting periods**. Teachers also mention farm work as reason to miss school days. However, with exception of the beginning and end of the school year, we did not find differences in attendance rates through the year, suggesting that sowing and harvesting work are not the main reasons behind the absence of almost 20 percent of the students every day. If working at the farm were the driver, absenteeism would be more evident at certain times of the year and among older learners.

Surely, work at the farm and home, market-days, illnesses and bad weather are all factors that preclude children from attending school every day; however, **there is lot of room to improve attendance if all stakeholders are persuaded of the importance of every child going to school every day, from the first to the last day of classes.**

Teacher absenteeism is also very high. Learners in our studies not only reported on their own absenteeism but also their teachers'. Specifically, they were asked whether there was any day in the last week when their teacher was not present. If the majority of learners reported that the teacher was absent in the previous week, we coded him/her as absent and otherwise as present. We also asked teachers to report if they had missed at least one day of class in the previous week. In Figure 3 we show teacher absenteeism as reported by learners and teachers, by language. Figures indicate that absenteeism among teachers is high and consistent with previous studies.

Figure 3. Percentage of teachers absent at least one day in the previous week



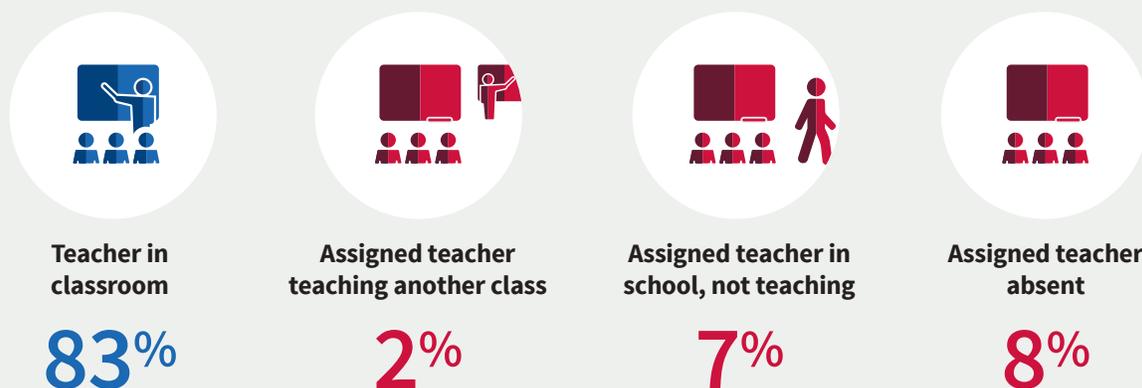
Teacher is considered absent if more than 50% of the learners in the classroom report so. SHRP and LARA schools do not overlap. Sources: Menendez (2017) and Menendez et al (2020)



Around one in three teachers reported being absent at least one day in the week previous to the interview (Luganda and Runyankore/Rukiga dominant language areas, 2019).

World Bank research based on unannounced visits to Ugandan public schools found that less than 40 percent of the teachers were actually in the classroom teaching learners, and 24 percent of the teachers were not present in the school. During the unannounced visits that NORC conducted for the LARA evaluation, we also gathered information about teachers' presence in schools (Figure 4). In our school sample –which is not nationally representative- the average daily teacher absenteeism was 8 percent, which is high although below the national average in the World Bank report.

Figure 4. Teachers' attendance and presence in the classroom on the day of NORC school visit



It is a big deal!

High absenteeism implies that the probability of having the teacher and learners simultaneously in the classroom is very low. An optimistic calculation using the information from the NORC's unannounced visits in Luganda and Runyankore/Rukiga dominant language areas suggests a **probability of 70 percent**.



This means that if the school year has approximately 180 school days, absenteeism reduces it to only 126 days. If the first and last week of the year are also missed, then the school year is **further reduced to only 116 days**. In some other areas of the country, absenteeism rates are higher and therefore there are even fewer effective school days. **Should we be surprised when the learners do not perform at the expected grade level?**

Recommendations

A lot of progress has been made in increasing school enrollment. Now, while we try to improve education quality, is the time to work hard to reduce absenteeism.



Efforts should be directed to raise awareness about the importance of attending school every day since the very early grades. Production and broadcasting of messages to parents and communities supporting school attendance are strongly recommended. This should be an intensive and long campaign.



Non-monetary incentives could be used to recognize learners and their families that start the school year on time and show high attendance.



The teachers noted that they are not recognized for their contribution to learning which has led to low teacher morale. Teachers and head teachers could be motivated through non-monetary incentives like provision of certificates of attendance and recognition on open days. In addition, on time salary payment should be the norm.

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