

New Penalties for Tajik Teachers Slammed

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Educationalists say harsh sanctions for teachers who leave the profession early will not solve staff shortages in Tajik schools.

Tough new penalties to try to keep newly-qualified teachers in the profession could make a catastrophic staff shortage in Tajikistan's schools even worse, say students and teachers interviewed by IWPR.

More than half of all graduate teachers fail to report for work in the job assigned to them by the education ministry, mostly because of the low salaries and poor conditions on offer. This is leading to an acute shortage of staff, especially in schools in remote areas where freshly-qualified teachers are commonly sent.

To stop young teachers leaving the profession, the Tajik minister of education has decided to start prosecuting graduates who do not take up the job that the ministry allocates them. However, students and teachers say the penalty will not work and that the authorities should instead consider introducing incentives.

There is currently a shortage of around 6,000 teachers in Tajikistan. While 8,000 student teachers enrolled on state-funded training courses, and more than 4,000 graduated this year, many will opt not to go into teaching because it is poorly paid and offers few prospects.

A high school teacher earns an average of 125 somoni, 36 US dollars, a month while primary school teachers can expect to earn a little more, around 135 somoni. Unqualified teachers - high school graduates used as a stopgap - earn even less - 80 to 85 somoni a month.

Students receiving a government grant sign a contract with the university that obliges them to remain in the profession for three years. The authorities often use the system to fill less desirable job vacancies in remote country schools, but many graduates turn down such jobs in spite of their contractual obligations.

A new clause will now be added to the contract which means those who leave within the first three years after graduation can be prosecuted in an attempt to recoup the money spent on training them.

The new measure, which was announced by Education Minister Abdujabbor Rahmonov on August 15, will affect graduates who finished their courses this summer and are due to start employment in September.

But Safarbek Nurov, the local government chief in Faizabad, a district some 70 kilometres east of Dushanbe, said authoritarian measures may only discourage young people from entering the teaching profession altogether.

"We have no right to force them to work after graduation, even if they studied on a budget [government grant] basis," he said.

Manzura Shorahimova, a fifth-grade teacher-training student, agrees that penalties will not stop people leaving, and argues that it will hard to enforce them fairly given the prevalence of corruption in Tajikistan.

“I think that such measures will be fruitless in our country,” she said. “The venality of our society means I can buy any document, and pay any school principal to get on their list of employees.

“They should take other measures to solve this problem [of staff shortages]. Those who are obliged to work in schools for three years will leave the job anyway if they don’t have proper conditions.”

Young people who come from towns to work in rural areas struggle to adapt to life there, as living conditions are basic and amenities such as gas and electricity are often lacking.

The reluctance of teachers to work in these areas has led to severe staff shortages. In the Khatlon region of southern Tajikistan, there is an estimated shortage of 3,146 teachers, including more than 300 Russian language teachers and more than 350 English teachers.

One consequence is that children are often taught by teachers who have only been educated to secondary-school level, or who are not specialists in the subjects they are teaching.

In addition to low salaries, there are other reasons why teachers drop out of the profession.

Partly as a legacy of Soviet-era employment patterns and partly because of low pay in education, most teachers are women. But as Saida Azizova, deputy headmistress of a school in Dushanbe, explained, many women quit their teaching jobs once they get married. “The family’s opinion is very important here,” she said.

Few men enter the profession because the pay scale would leave them unable to support their families.

“What man would go for such salary? Of the 71 teachers at my school, only four are men,” said Kumri Nazarova, headmistress of a school in Khujand in northern Tajikistan. “If salaries were higher, there would be more men working in schools.”

Sharif, a former chemistry teacher from the Yavan district, about 50 km south of the capital, was forced to trade his books for tools and is now working as a builder in Dushanbe. His wages has shot up to about 100 dollars a month, from the 20 dollars he was earning as a teacher.

“I have three children and my wife doesn’t work, so my salary wasn’t enough to support my family. If someone falls ill, where would I find the money to treat them? I very much like the profession, but I just had to leave the school,” he said.

Many other male teachers who leave the profession go to work as labour migrants in Russia, where they can command higher wages even if they take menial jobs.

Rustam Ahmedov, deputy head of the Tajik State University of Foreign Languages, said another reason why so many male graduates disappear is that at least half of those enrolling for teaching training only do

so because it exempts them from being conscripted into the army.

“Parents don’t want their sons to bear arms and they try to get them placed anywhere else they can. It isn’t easy to get into other universities, so they enter our university by various ruses.”

Ravshan Olimov, a student at Qorghon-Teppa University in southern Tajikistan, told IWPR that he enrolled at university in order to avoid the draft.

He has no plans to take a teaching job when he leaves, even if he faces prosecution. “Why would I do that? The salary is inadequate,” he said.

Javarsho Immatshoev, a human resources expert at the education ministry, said the authorities have only resorted to the extreme measure of prosecuting defaulters on the contract because other methods have failed.

He insisted considerable efforts have been made to retain teachers by improving their terms and conditions. In May 2006, the government approved a new package of benefits for young teachers, including land to build houses, livestock, interest-free bank loans.

According to Immatshoev, the measure is not as effective as it could be as some local government officials are not even aware of its existence, despite attempts to publicise it.

Analysts, teachers and students say that the teacher shortage cannot be resolved until there are radical changes to government policy and the education system.

Abdulkarim Khaybulloev, the local government chief in Shaartuz district in the south-west of the country, said attempt should be made to improve facilities, including entertainment such as cinemas, in rural areas so that they begin to approximate to life in the towns.

His colleague in Faizabad, Nurov, said teachers need better pay and more benefits if they are to stay in the job.

Political analyst Parviz Mullojanov likewise believes that careers in teaching will look more attractive if the government comes up with an improved package that might include tax breaks, free public utilities, family benefits, and land on which to grow food.

“Let our officials give the best plots of land to the teachers instead of awarding them to themselves and their families,” he said. “That will encourage people to work as teachers. Methods that don’t involve economic [incentives] will be useless.”

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