

# Zimbabwe gets back on track with education goals

By [Gabrielle Wade](#)

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Zimbabwe teachers were expected to return to school on 2 March after almost a year of being on strike. Presently, the Zimbabwean dollar is so weak due to hyperinflation that teachers are demanding to be paid in a foreign currency because, on their current salaries, they are unable to afford basic costs of living or, for some, transportation to and from work.

The end of the strike has been postponed numerous times. Schools were expected to open in mid-January, for example, but this never happened. Negotiations were in progress at the time, but no deal had been made yet, so teachers continued to strike. According to the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), teachers were demanding an average salary of \$2,500 a month.

The year-long strike has caused huge problems in the Zimbabwe education system, with school attendance down to about 20% from approximately 80% at the beginning of 2008, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The problems are even more serious in rural areas, where 94% of schools are closed and children are unable to make it to the few open schools in urban areas. The schools that remained in operation over the year in urban areas have done so with the help from wealthy parents willing to pay teachers' salaries.

Not only were many schools shut down for the year, but also students' exams from last year remained un-graded until this week, when teachers agreed to end their strike and resume grading, according to the *Zimbabwe Guardian*.

UNICEF representative in Zimbabwe, Roeland Monasch called for government action in a statement earlier last month saying, "The education situation is a national disaster. It is imperative that the unity government focus on this."

Although the specifics still have not been worked out on the new deal, President of the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (Zimta) Tendai Chikore stated this week, "We have reached an agreement that teachers much go back to school on Monday, while outstanding specific issues are being addressed."

In an effort to reach teachers' demands, education minister, David Coltart told the *Zimbabwe Herald* newspaper that he has asked for \$458 million from donors, including UNICEF. UNICEF has provided the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture with \$17 million over the past two years, but the support UNICEF offers is not meant to go to teachers.

UNICEF communications officer for Zimbabwe, Tsitsi Singizi told MediaGlobal, "Our support has been to improve the learning environment—fees, teaching and learning materials and classroom construction — and not directly for teachers' salaries." This week, UNICEF will help by providing learning and teaching materials to half of Zimbabwe's primary schools, and it will continue its support of students by paying the school fees for 250,000 orphan children, said Singizi.

As the money provided by UNICEF is not meant to pay teachers, it is still unclear if the government will be able to come through on the current deals they are attempting to make with teachers. According to President of PTUZ Takavafira Zhou, teachers have agreed to salaries of \$1,500 a month, lower than initially demanded, and have asked that their children be allowed to attend school for free.

The salaries agreed upon are the regional standards for teachers. Chikoore told the American Free Press, “We have agreed to go back to work solely on the goodwill shown by the government, but we are also demanding that our salaries must match what teachers are being paid in the region.”

If the government is able to make good on its agreements with teachers, Zimbabwe schools should remain open and the country will hopefully still meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of primary education for all children by 2015. Singizi said, “The crisis was being driven by the absence of teachers. We believe that once the issue is solved, then attendance of pupils will pick up.”

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