

# HOW TO BEAT BACK-TO-SCHOOL COSTS

By Umar Nsubuga

As schools prepare to reopen, many parents are once again confronted with the familiar but heavy responsibility of school shopping and fees payment. From tuition and uniforms to books, food items and transport, the cost of education continues to rise, placing enormous pressure on households.

For parents across Uganda, careful planning, honest conversations and collective action are proving to be essential tools for navigating this challenging period.

Many parents say school fees remains the biggest burden for most of them. Charles Chemutai, a parent of six, explains that traditionally, parents relied on proceeds from coffee, cotton, livestock and small businesses to meet school expenses.

However, many of these income sources were severely affected by the pandemic, leaving families struggling to raise lump-sum payments.

Eric Mukhwana, another parent from Mbale, says in many schools, tuition ranges between sh500,000 and sh1.5m per term. For parents unable to pay at once, he advises early engagement with school administrators.

"Parents should visit schools before reopening and negotiate flexible payment plans," he says, cautioning that parents must honour such agreements to maintain trust and future flexibility.



Teachers registering students of Bishop SSS Mukono at the beginning of third term last year. Achieving a smooth return to school for learners requires meticulous planning, especially from the parents

## SCHOOL DEMANDS

Many parents believe schools should reduce or standardise requirements. Allan Kitekika, a parent, calls on regulators to set clearer guidelines, suggesting schools use part of the fees to procure basic supplies.

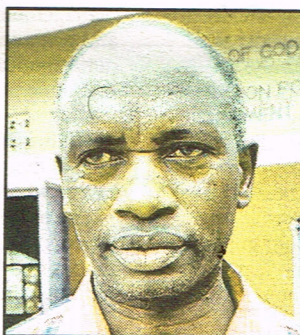
Retired teacher Norman Kiptala from Kween district says schools should limit the amount of food learners bring and, where possible, sell essential items on campus at subsidised prices.

Sarah Ayo, a mother of two, advises parents to consult teachers if demands seem excessive, then discuss the matter with their children.

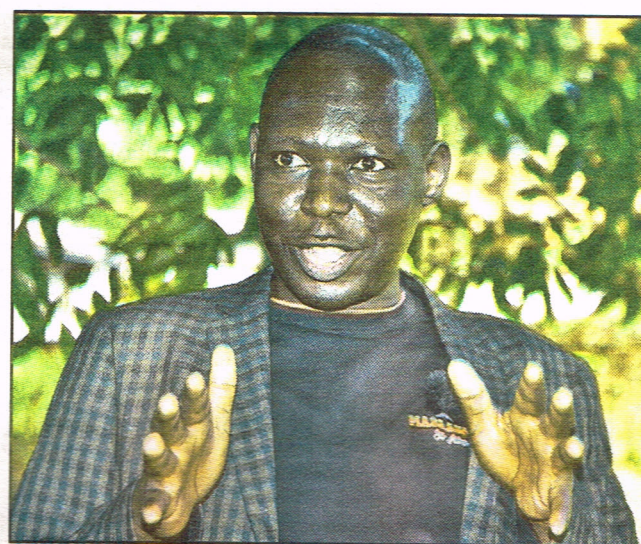
She also cautions against keeping children at home simply because shopping is incomplete. "If fees are paid and meals are assured, let the child go to school," she says.



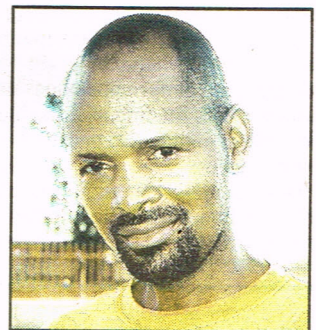
Ayo: Parent



Chemutai: Parent



Mukhwana: Parent



Kitekika: Parent

## FINANCIAL DISCIPLINE

Working with a clear budget helps parents stay in control. Grace Munyambabazi, Kabale district's principal education officer, encourages parents to budget strictly according to what they can afford.

Robinah Naluggo, a single mother of three, says her children's lists often include luxury food items.

"I first clear fees and school requirements. Whatever remains goes to extras," she says.

Beatrice Nkwenge, a counsellor and senior nursing officer at Rugazi Health Centre IV in Rubirizi district, says difficult economic times offer valuable lessons. Involving children in budgeting discussions helps them understand financial limits and develop discipline. Allowing them to suggest what they can forego fosters responsibility and empathy.



Nkwenge

on pocket money and large quantities of food.

He advises parents to focus on items schools do not provide but learners genuinely need, such as personal

grooming items, sanitary towels for girls, soap and toothpaste.

For day scholars, lunch fees and transport are equally critical.

## TALK OPENLY WITH CHILDREN

Communication is crucial. Munyambabazi advises parents to calmly explain why they cannot meet every request. He stresses that discussions should be respectful and non-threatening.

"Do not shout or abuse the child. Explain the situation honestly and calmly," Munyambabazi says.

However, experts warn that failure to meet a child's expectations may affect self-esteem, especially when learners compare themselves with peers from wealthier families.

In such cases, counselling support from educationists can help children cope and remain focused on their studies.

Parents also caution against excessive food supplies. Allan Kitekika, a parent, says too much grub can distract learners from academics.

He argues that while some schools provide inadequate meals, parents should strike a balance rather than overcompensate.

## WORKING TOGETHER AS PARENTS

Mike Senoga, an economist, believes co-operation among

parents can significantly ease the burden. He encourages parents to pool resources and buy requirements in bulk from wholesale shops.

"If three parents each contribute sh100,000 instead of spending sh300,000 individually, everyone gets relief," he explains, adding that trust and commitment are essential for such arrangements to succeed.

## REAL-LIFE STRUGGLES

Immaculate Namukasa, another parent, says the loss of an NGO scholarship has left her unprepared. She worries about supporting four children, including one in Senior Four.

"I want my children educated so they don't go through what I have gone through," she says.