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BY VICENT LUSAMBYA

The Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) results over the years have laid bare a troubling reality: learners in hard-to-reach areas such as Kalangala, Elgon, Rwenzori, and Karamoja continue to struggle to match the performance of their urban counterparts.

Despite efforts by the Ministry of Education and Sports to raise standards, these regions remain at a disadvantage, unable to effectively compete with schools in towns and cities.

For instance, in the recently released results, only 886 out of 46,926 candidates in West Nile passed in Division One. Districts such as Madi-Okollo and Obongi barely registered on the scale, recording just one and two Division One candidates, respectively.

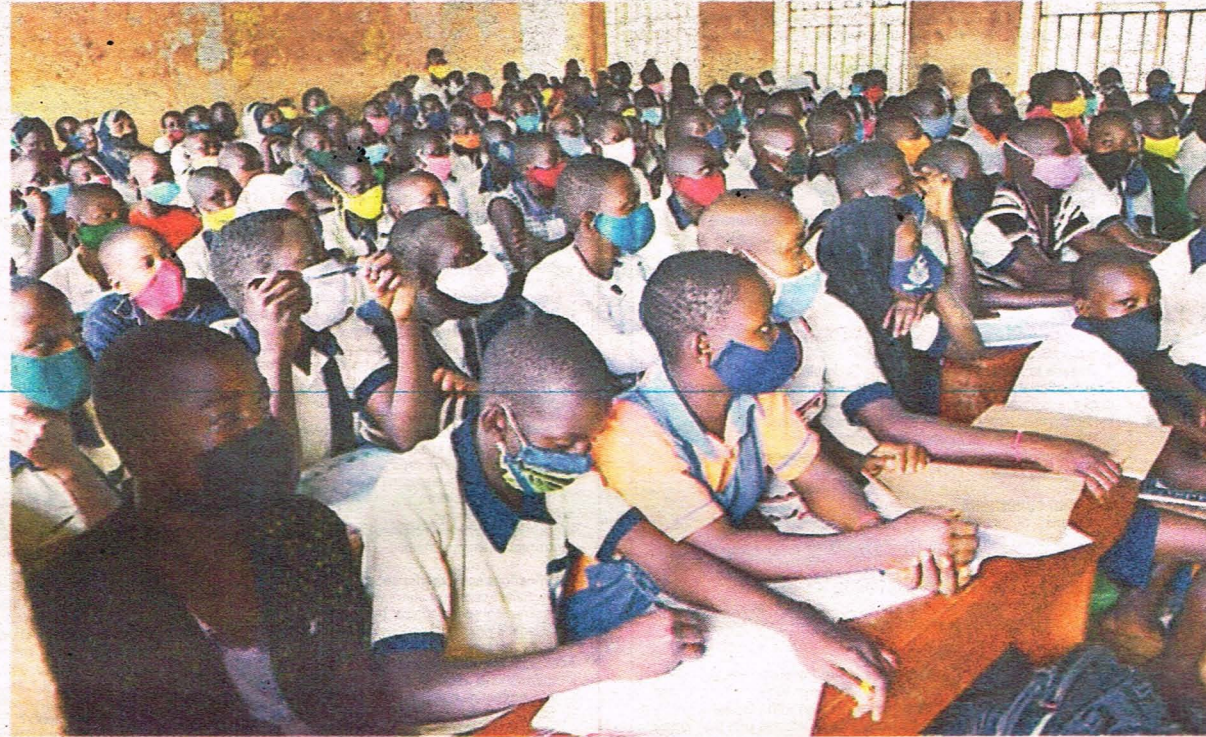
Educationists attribute the poor performance to a range of challenges, including a shortage of teachers, poor facilitation, limited competition, and weak supervision.

Mr Hasadu Kirabira, chairperson of the National Private Education Institutions Association (NPEIA), links the poor outcomes to the scarcity of private schools in hard-to-reach areas, which denies Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools the competition that drives performance in urban settings.

"These districts have very few private schools, and some have none at all. This does not create competition for government schools, unlike what we see in urban areas," he said.

Renowned educationist Fagil Mandy stressed the need for a deliberate mindset shift among all stakeholders, including parents, who often assume that village schools are destined to perform poorly.

# How to boost PLE scores in hard-to-reach districts



Pupils attend a lesson at Muhorro Muslim Primary School in Kagadi District in 2023. PHOTO/FILE

"We automatically think that schools in Karamoja, for example, will do poorly. This mindset is upsetting because parents end up transferring learners to urban schools, yet it is these same learners who could help hard-to-reach schools register good results. Every area can perform well," he said.

Mr Kirabira also noted that teachers in these regions rarely undergo continuous professional development, leaving them stuck with outdated skills.

"The way teachers graduate from colleges is often the way they remain. There is no deliberate initiative by the National Curriculum Development Centre or the ministry to help them upgrade their skills," he said.

Mr Emmanuel Gitta, a youth coun-

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seller and spokesperson of the Uganda Counselling Association, added that some teachers themselves discourage learners.

"I have received complaints from learners who said teachers told them

that certain questions or topics are meant for urban schools. This kind of inappropriate mentoring drains learners of hope," he said.

Mr Mandy further pointed to poor working environments and weak supervision by heads of institutions and district inspectors of schools as contributing factors.

"Assessment of learners is also problematic in many government schools compared to the private sector. Inspectors of schools need to move more seamlessly," he said.

Mr Kirabira emphasised that, unlike in urban centres where parents treat education as a shared responsibility, parents in hard-to-reach areas often leave the burden entirely to teachers.

"Teachers need support and appreciation. Parents must also play a bigger role. In many cases, learners are overloaded with domestic work and have to trek long distances to school, making it difficult to balance studies and home responsibilities," he said.

Mr Gitta recommended extending mentorship programmes to both pupils and parents, adding that both sides need guidance.

"Parents in these areas should be mentored against overburdening learners with domestic chores and failing to provide both material and emotional support," he said.

Mr Mandy added that schools should also revive co-curricular activities, which play a key role in shaping learners' minds but have been largely neglected.

Speaking during the release of the 2025 PLE results last week, the Minister of Education and Sports, Ms Janet Museveni, said while the ministry is cracking down on absentee teachers, parents must also act as whistle-blowers.

"Why should a teacher who earns a monthly salary be absent for an entire month without a single parent raising an alarm?" she asked.

"Teachers who continue to receive pay from taxpayers while absent from duty must decide whether they want to remain in public service or exit."

She added that the Directorate of Education Standards (DES) has been tasked to fully utilise government-funded technology to monitor teacher attendance and classroom instruction.

Ms Museveni further warned that school administrators will be held accountable, particularly in cases involving ungraded candidates.

"When releasing future PLE results, we must have answers as to why a school with a head teacher, teachers, inspectors, and a district education officer on the government payroll still produces many ungraded candidates," she said.