

Govt schools hit hard as first day of term sees low attendance

Some public primary schools reported zero attendance on day one.

BY MONITOR TEAM

Many schools across the country reported fewer learners showing up on the first day of the new academic term that opened yesterday. A countrywide survey by this publication revealed some public primary schools reported zero attendance on day one.

It was not immediately clear whether the no-show was a result of school fees or factors such as rain as witnessed on Monday morning in some parts of the country, including Masaka, Kyotera, Lwengo, and Rakai districts.

At Kamengo-Nsonso Primary School, Rakai District, classes remained empty as the learners stayed away.

A female teacher, who preferred anonymity, said even the few pupils who reported yesterday returned home at around 1am. "We could not keep them here when they were

few. Lessons will start in the coming days," she said.

In Masaka City, the situation wasn't any different, but Mr Stephen Kakeeto, the education officer, said the low turnout was more prevalent in public schools compared to private ones.

"Some parents have a tendency to discourage their children from reporting on day one, so as to help them with some domestic chores, including digging, fetching water, cooking, and cleaning the house," he said.

At Bwaala Primary School, the outgoing head teacher, Mr Sulaiman Baingana, attributed the low turnout to failure by some parents to raise school fees and other requirements, while others did not clear fees for last year.

The Kabale District Education Officer, Mr Moses Bwengye, attributed the low attendance to some parents' mentality of thinking that there is no teaching during the first week of a new term. He warned the teachers against absenteeism.

Attendance remained worryingly low in several primary schools across the island district of Kalangala, with the head teachers blaming poverty and growing belief among the parents that the opening week of term is not important.

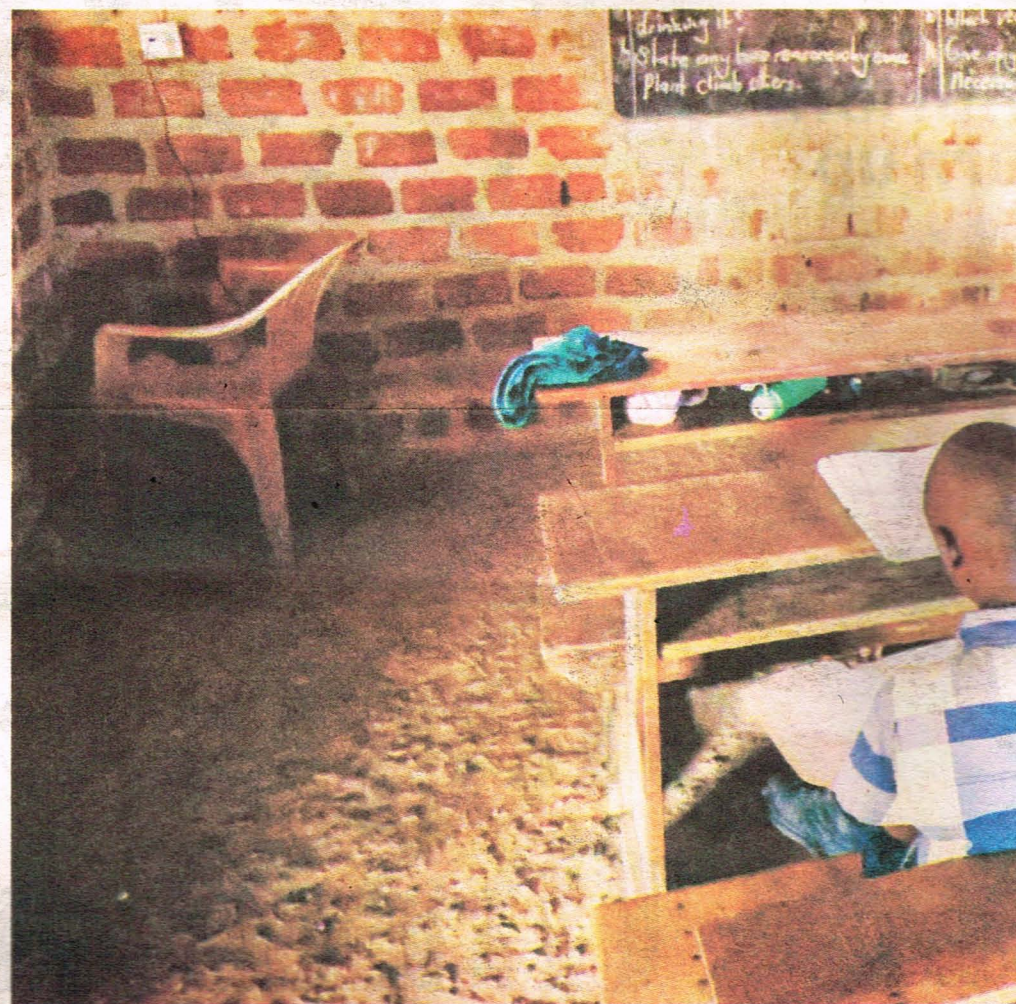
At many rural schools surveyed in the district, the pupils reported spending the entire day clearing the bushy compounds and cleaning the classrooms.

At Kibanga Primary School on Buggala Island, only 200 out of the expected 750 pupils reported for classes on the first day. The situation was even worse at Kachanga Primary School on Buuvu Island in Bufumira Sub-county, where just 30 of the 400 pupils turned up.

The head teacher of Kibanga Primary School, Mr Wilberforce Namanya, said many parents delayed sending the children due to lack of money for scholastic materials.

"We need to sensitise parents. Many say they do not have money to buy books and other scholastic materials even after such a long holiday," he said.

At Kachanga Primary School, Ms Lydia Nakamya, the deputy head teacher, said late reporting by pupils has become the norm in the com-



A P3 pupil of Earnest Primary School, Kisugu, revises his books yesterday. PHOTO/LBRAHIM KAVUMA



Children with their suitcases at Old Taxi Park in Kampala yesterday. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA

munity, with parents deliberately choosing to bring children in the second week of the term without any sound reason.

"We are now brainstorming ways of engaging parents so they can abandon this habit," she said.

However, education stakeholders said the challenge goes beyond pupils. Ms Aisha Nantaayi, the Uganda National Teachers' Union (Unatu) chairperson for Kalangala District, said teacher attendance is also low, largely due to frustration over unfulfilled government promises on salary enhancement.

"Some teachers are very disappointed with the government for failing to fulfil its promise for salary enhancement. Many are now thinking of other options, including leaving the country in search of greener pastures," she said.

Ms Deborah Nampeewo, the head teacher of Kibuuka Memorial Primary School in Mpigi District, said one of the classroom blocks was damaged by a rainstorm last week and 235 learners in Primary Three and Four remained stranded. Of the

800 learners who completed Third Term, 300 reported yesterday.

"So, we have not been affected by the low numbers, but I am sure by next week, we shall have many learners, which might force us to send some back home to roof the damaged block," he said.

Most schools in Tororo District recorded low attendance.

At St Jude Annex Primary School, a government-aided primary school in Malaba only 17 learners had reported for studies yet by the close of last year, the school had an enrolment of 789 pupils.

Ms Robbinah Amoiti, a caretaker head teacher, blamed the low turnout of learners on parents who think that schools do not begin classes in the first week of the term.

"I am happy that all my teachers reported ready to teach, but we are only saddened by the low turnout of children, with no child in Primary One and Two" she said.

She added that they are also going to liaise with village council leaders to move around the villages to remind parents to release their chil-

dren. At Rock View School in Town, the school head teacher du Gamoiza, confirmed that 500 of the anticipated 2,000 had turned up.

Ms Joyce Khamuka, the teacher at Busamaga Primary School, said learners' attendance was low, forcing the school to delay teaching. She said more learners who turned up yesterday lacked basic scholastic materials such as books.

Low attendance hit some public schools, with some having less than half their expected enrolment.

Pioneer Primary School in City saw a disappointing start to term with only 103 pupils reported, way below the expected 340.

Kinchinjaji Primary School in roti City East also struggled with only 159 pupils showing up against an expected 500. The administration blamed the low turnout on financial struggles, saying it is largely on daily earnings to cover costs.

Mr Alfred Enyidu, the

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Some of the pupils who reported yesterday at Nakasero Primary School, Kampala. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE

teacher of Kinchinjaji Primary School, warned that pupils are expected to sit the beginning of term exams today and asked the parents to ensure the pupils report to school.

In the Lango Sub-region, the situation wasn't different. At Abela Primary School, Aleka Sub-county in Oyam District, more than half of the learners did not show up yesterday. Similarly, at Truth Primary School in Lira City West Division, Lira City, around 500 learners reported, out of the total enrolment of 740.

Mr Tonny Ojok, the Abela School Management Committee chairperson, said many parents were still shopping for scholastic materials. "The low turnout is expected to affect syllabus completion and overall academic performance. We urge parents to prioritise education and send their children back to school."

At Rupa Seed School in Moroto District, Karamoja Sub-region, only three learners showed up yesterday out of the anticipated 510.

Mr Daniel Bazira, the school head teacher, said some students reported on February 3, but left after learning that the government had changed the reporting date to February 10.

"We don't know what the future holds, especially with the ending of the feeding programme for secondary schools by the World Food Programme," he said.

At Masaka Primary School in Ntoroko District, the head teacher, Mr Vincent Asimwe, said only 28 of the 572 learners reported yesterday.

He added that only two teachers reported, while the rest were expected to turn up the following day.

"Most families do not have radios. Initially, we indicated on the report cards that learners would report on February 2, but when the ministry changed the date, many of the learners and parents did not get this information," Mr Asimwe explained.

He added that some parents relocated with their children in December due to floods and have not yet returned.

Mr Asimwe said he expects enrolment to rise once floodwaters in some villages subside, allowing the families to return home.

He also revealed that the school has decided to return to its old premises after a year of displacement by flooding from the River Semuliki. But he warned that the structures remain unsafe.

In Kagadi District, at Kagadi Model Primary School, which is government-aided, 498 of the 600 expected learners reported on Tuesday.

The head teacher, Mr Emmanuel Abigaba, said the turnout was encouraging, although some of the learners were still absent because their parents were still

Key concerns. Some parents have a tendency to discourage their children from reporting on day one, so as to help them with some domestic chores, including digging, fetching water, cooking, and cleaning the house," - Stephen Kakeeto, Masaka City education officer

looking for scholastic materials.

"Our enrolment is big. We need more classrooms, an additional three teachers because we currently have only eight, and we also need funds to renovate the staff house," Mr Abigaba said.

At Kagadi Secondary School, the head teacher, Mr Ramathan Nyendo Barongo, said the school's total enrolment stands at 3,891 learners, but only 1,200 had reported on the first day.

"Our parents are still stuck with the mentality that the first day is for cleaning, which is not true because today, we have started covering the syllabus," he said.

Schools in Bundibugyo District, including Bundibugyo Parents, Bundibugyo Demonstration primary schools, and Bumadu Seed Secondary School, have witnessed a low turnout of the learners.

Mr John Byamukama, the district education officer, said the issue of low turnout of learners at the beginning of every term is one of the weaknesses affecting the education standards of the district. He, however, attributed this to the parents' negligence.

"It is unfortunate that some parents fail to prepare their children for school on time. Today [Tuesday], we have witnessed only a few learners in all the schools we visited. We call upon parents to ensure they send their children to school," he said.

Attendance was also low in the government-aided schools in Kabale, Rukiga, and Rubanda districts, but the situation was worse at Bugandura Primary School in Rubanda District, with only 23 of the 241 pupils showing up yesterday.

Mr Willy Friday, the head teacher, said five of the eight teachers reported.

At Karengyere Primary School in Muko Sub-County, only 77 of the expected 638 learners reported. At Mushanje Primary School, Mr Everest Kanyonza, the head teacher, said the situation was relatively better, with 296 of the 900 pupils reporting on day one.

In many schools visited in the West Nile Sub-region, the attendance was relatively good, while others have planned to report by the end of the week, especially where school administrators are

demanding school fees on arrival.

A parent in Arua City, Ms Josephine Abio, said: "This time the school administrators were not hard because they allowed us to send children back to school even without fees. I think they understood the financial difficulties we are facing. It is good to give some time for parents to pay fees."

She said the financial difficulties may force some parents to secure loans to pay school fees and requirements, which she said is not good.

Another parent in Nebbi District, Mr Lesly Opira, said: "I will not rush to send the children to school because I haven't got the school fees and they would rather stay at home for this week."

For the secondary schools, most students in the boarding sections reported at the weekend. The head teacher of St Joseph's College, Ombaci, Mr Charles Ondoga, said: "Our set standard is at least 50 percent payment at the beginning. But where parents are unable to meet that, we do case by case as they come to us to discuss."

Ms Miriam Aheebwa, a parent at Busy Bee Junior School in Bushenyi District, said: "As a parent, you have to work hard for your child to go to school because the child who is not educated won't be of use in the future. So, whether you break a savings box, but at least your child has to study."

However, Mr Nathan Wabwire, the inspector of schools for Mayuge District, said there was an improved attendance among both pupils and teachers compared to the previous years.

He said the extended stay at home during the election period gave parents adequate time to prepare basic necessities such as scholastic materials, uniforms, and school fees for their children.

Meanwhile, Jinja City Education Officer, Mr Paul Balinaine, said: "Reports from inspections indicate a rise of more than 50 percent of learners in class. This is a good number, which we have not been seeing previously."

He attributed the improved attendance to the extension of the commencement of the first term.

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School children on boda boda with their luggage on Kampala Road yesterday. The low turnout in most schools was attributed to failure by some parents to raise school fees and other requirements. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA