

SCHOOLS REOPENING: PARENTS DECRY RISING COSTS, INFLATED DEMANDS

By Vision Reporters

Schools across Uganda yesterday reopened for the first term of the 2026 academic year after a delayed start caused by the January general elections. From Kampala to Iganga, Kamwenge to Pallisa, and across both government-aided and private institutions, learners were slowly returning to their classrooms amid mounting concerns over school fees and rising prices of scholastic materials from parents.

While some schools have registered good turnouts and embraced flexible payment arrangements, many others report low attendance, with parents struggling to meet financial demands following a long holiday season, election disruptions and a difficult economic climate.

SCHOOL FEES PRESSURE

Parents have decried the rising cost of school fees and requirements, saying the financial burden has become unbearable.

Daphne Nansubuga, a parent at Daffodils Primary School, said even having one child in Primary One (P1) comes with overwhelming expenses.

"The list of requirements is endless. We pay for swimming, compulsory birthday celebrations, meals and drinks, and on top of that we are still asked to pack food. In P1, the fees are sh1.2m, plus sh350,000 for transport," Nansubuga said. "This is too much, yet it has been normalised. No one is talking about it and there is no regulation."

At St Peter's Secondary School Nsambya in Kampala, Justine Mirembe, a single mother from Mityana district, walked out of the school gates visibly distressed after failing to clear outstanding fees.

"How can they refuse my child to attend class because of money? Don't they know that I'm a single mother?" she told a *New Vision* reporter, moments before instructing her daughter over the phone to leave the school after administrators insisted on full tuition payment.

Mirembe, whose child has been at the school for years, said her plan to shift her daughter to the boarding section was halted by demands to first clear sh1.56m.

"This money is too much for me. I hoped they could listen to my plea but they did not



Joyce Moriku Kaducu, the primary education state minister, serving food to Kitante Primary School pupils as the school opened for first term. (Scan image using the Vision Digital Experience to watch video)

and yet she has been here. I am disappointed, she will stay at home until I get the other money because now, I can't change her since I had paid part of the fees," she said.

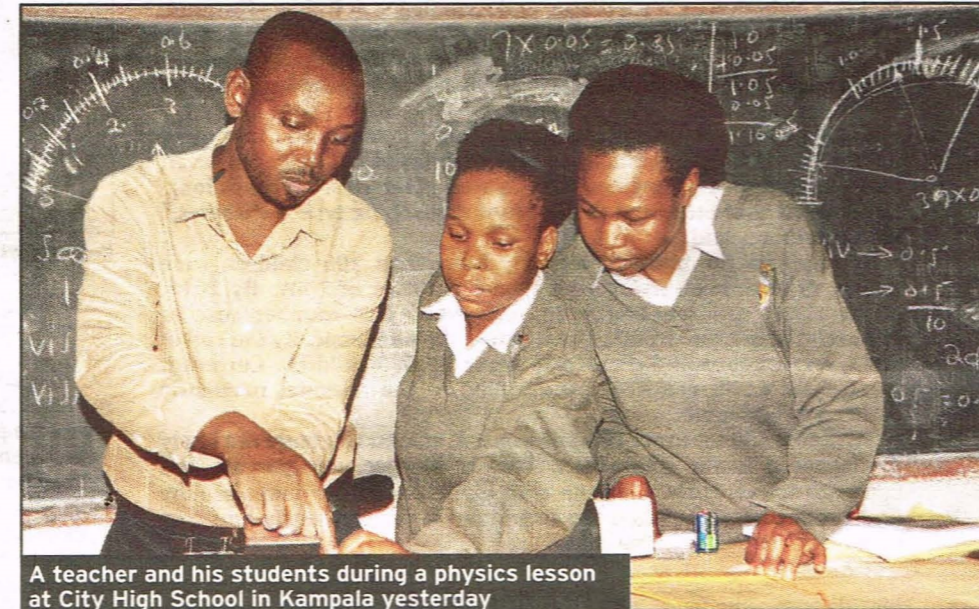
Her frustration mirrors that of many parents countrywide, where negotiations over fees, partial payments, and grace periods have become the dominant language of school reopening.

"I have two children joining S1 and the schools I wanted to take them to required that all fees [sh3.9m] be cleared within four days after giving us vacancies. How can I clear more than sh8m plus their personal requirements? I also have other children and they have asked me for 75% of the sh1.5m they pay," said Faruk Musoke a parent *New Vision* found at Kikuubo trading centre in Kampala after shopping.

"I am now here in Kikuubo but everything is expensive, they asked for special reams of paper and each is sh38,000. Government needs to regulate schools. Imagine we are paying all this money and the term is just six weeks for S5, seven weeks for S1 and just two months for other classes. This term alone I will end up paying sh12.6m for only five children but that's like five times of what I earn and I have to get loans. Everything is expensive, almost double of what it costed."

For some parents, the financial strain has forced them to change schools altogether. At Kitante Primary School, Immaculate Nagujja said she transferred her child

from a private school to a government-aided one after her business declined.



A teacher and his students during a physics lesson at City High School in Kampala yesterday

"I could no longer manage private school fees. Here, even the small contributions I pay can be cleared in installments," she said.

Others, like Jonathan Mutumba of Emma High School, said paying even half of the required fees was a struggle. "We could only raise sh1m out of shs2.2m," he said.

MIXED TURNOUTS IN URBAN SCHOOLS

At St Peter's Nsambya Primary School, a government-aided institution, headteacher Josephine Namusoke acknowledged that even relatively low functional fees of sh150,000 remain difficult for many families to raise.

"During elections, parents



Weraga, the headteacher of City High School

were not working. So, failing to bring children on the first day was expected. By the second day of the term, the school had recorded 2,003 learners, down from 3,353 in the previous year," Namusoke said.

State minister for primary education Moriku Kaducu, who made surprise visits to several schools, including

Parent and alumnus Michael Mbogo praised the school's approach, saying learners are allowed into class with at least 50% of the charges paid.

"Even if you don't meet full requirements, you can discuss with the headteacher. The child is not denied access to class," he said.

The headteacher of City High School in Kampala, Mary Goretti Weraga, confirmed that most learners had cleared at least half of the fees and encouraged parents to continue engaging the school. Mbuya Parents' School reported more than three quarters of learners present, with headteacher Moses Isiko attributing the success to individualised engagement with parents.

"We cannot deny learners the chance to be in school simply because they haven't cleared the first phase; we are also parents," he said.

CHALLENGES UPOUNTRY

However, outside Kampala, low attendance remains widespread. In Iganga district, some primary schools recorded alarmingly low numbers, with Busei Primary School registering only 34 pupils out of an expected 1,332 on the first day as recorded by the school authorities.

Deputy headteacher Francis Babalanda said many parents delay to buy scholastic materials, assuming that the first few days of school are for cleaning. Local leaders warned of possible enforcement measures against parents who fail to send children to school.

In Pallisa, district education officials reported an average turnout of just 10% in UPE schools. District inspector of schools John Opedun blamed the traditional belief that the first week is non-academic. He said out of 82 school calendar open days, parents knowingly waste up to 14 days.

Local authorities pledged closer monitoring, insisting that free education programmes must deliver value.

In contrast, schools in Kagadi, Kibaale and Kamwenge districts registered better turnouts, particularly in government schools. Kagadi Secondary School reported about 80% attendance, though headteacher Ramadan Nyondo Barongo cited shortages of teachers, classrooms and laboratories.

District education officers in the region praised parents for sending children to school but urged them to provide the

basic requirements.

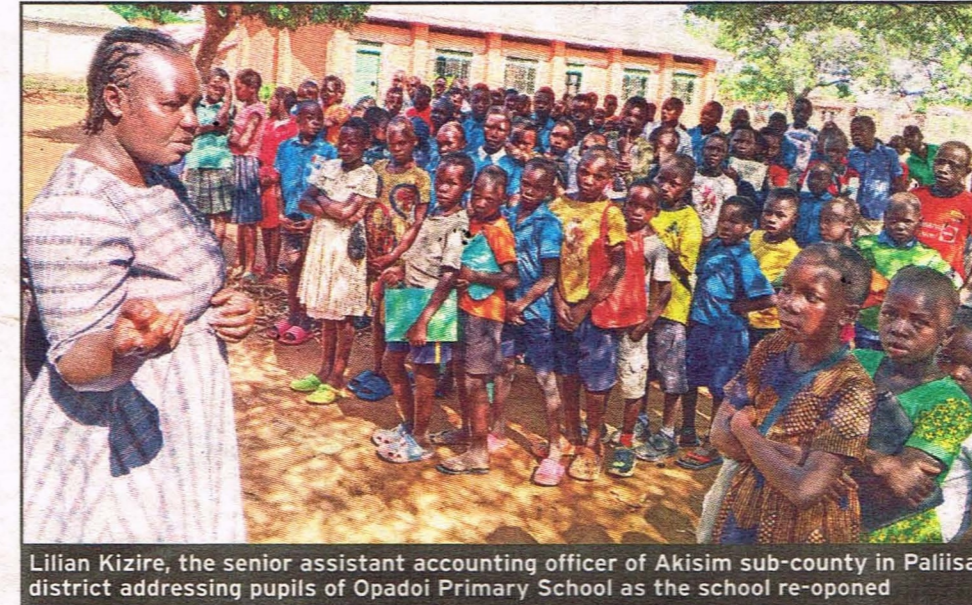
"Teachers are prepared and are teaching seriously; we ask parents who have not sent their children to do so," said Kagadi senior district education officer Beatrice Mbabazi.

In Kamwenge, rising prices of scholastic materials added pressure on the parents. Traders reported increased demand for items such as books, paper reams, bags and shoes, with prices climbing sharply at the start of the term.

LATE REPORTING COSTS

Education experts have warned that delayed reporting by learners, especially within the first two weeks of the school term comes at a high academic and social cost, despite widespread parental belief that the period is reserved for cleaning and non-teaching activities.

Jane Frances Atima, a director at the Directorate of Education Standards in the education ministry, said reports from



Lilian Kizire, the senior assistant accounting officer of Akisim sub-county in Pallisa district addressing pupils of Opadoi Primary School as the school re-opened

upcountry schools indicate low learner turnout at the start of term, driven largely by misconceptions among parents. "The school calendar is very clear. When schools

open, teachers are present, and learning begins immediately. If children are not in school, they miss out on learning," Atima said, adding that early absence disrupts lesson sequencing

and syllabus coverage.

She noted that while the ministry is still gathering comprehensive data to determine the gravity of the situation, the responsibility of

addressing late reporting lies largely with local governments. "District leaders should be creating awareness and engaging parents early. However, interventions cannot be one-size-fits-all because communities face different challenges," she said.

Maureen Kizito, a senior child protection officer with Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS Uganda) and a curriculum specialist, said the cost of late reporting goes beyond missed classroom lessons.

"School is not only about academics. Children learn values, social skills and emotional regulation through interaction with peers and teachers. Those first days help them settle, bond and adapt to the school environment," Kizito explained.

She acknowledged parents' concerns about excessive cleaning but urged balance. "Light cleaning helps develop responsibility and life skills,

but it becomes a problem when it replaces teaching. Schools should prepare environments before learners return," she said.

Kizito called for stricter monitoring by education inspectors, district officials and community leaders to ensure schools begin teaching on time and that parents send children back promptly.

"Once a national reopening date is set, everyone must adhere to it but also parents should know that school doesn't mean classrooms only. There's also technical skills and moderate cleaning could be one of them. So, missing out on them, children miss knowledge and skills," she said.

Filed by John Musenze, Samuel Balaqadde, Derrick Muduku and Isaac Nuwagaba, Andrew Musinguzi, Ivan Tsebeni, Rhyman Agaba and Ibrahim Ruhweza Moses Bikala and Hillary Abinsinguzi