

Why there is low learner turnout in Greater Kampala

Several school administrators attribute the low turnout to financial constraints. Some say parents and guardians overspent during the festive and election seasons.

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As the first term of the 2026 academic year commenced yesterday, many learners did not show up at several schools in Greater Kampala.

This publication spoke to educationists and parents who largely attributed the low turnout to failure by many parents to raise school requirements and tuition fees on time as well as the inherent culture of reporting back a week after the official starting date.

Ms Agnes Kabalisa, the head teacher of Nakivubo Blue Primary School, located in the heart of Kampala admitted that the low turnout on the first day of the term, remains a chronic challenge for her school, given that some learners struggle to secure scholastic materials.

"Of course the turnout on day one of the term is not always good. People are still looking for books," she explained.

Nakivubo Primary School is one of the 79 Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) government-aided schools that provide free education to children, especially those from families that are economically challenged.

At Nakasero Primary School, the deputy head teacher, Ms Angella Kisolo, explained that about 50 percent of the learners had showed up but she was optimistic that more would show up in the coming days.

Ms Kisolo added that the school does not charge tuition fees, but parents contribute towards learners' lunch. Each learner is also expected to bring four rolls of toilet paper and a broom.



Parents and guardians alongside learners at Old Taxi Park, Kampala City, carry suitcases and other items as term one of the 2026 academic year commences. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA

She argued that reporting on time is very important since the teachers and learners get adequate time to cover the syllabus as planned.

"It is very important because it gets them started on the curriculum," Ms Kisolo said.

She added: "The period of time that we are supposed to cover a term is specified by the Ministry of Education and Sports. Every time that you miss without being there or attending to children, you lag behind."

Mr Amon Kansiime, the head teacher of Ebenezer Primary School Kisugu in Kampala, said the turnout did not meet his expectations.

"We expected many learners to have showed up today but we can't tell the

reason why they are not here. Usually, we have many children coming on the first day but now we see the turnout is not very good," Mr Kansiime said.

Like several other school administrators, Mr Kansiime attributed the low turnout to financial constraints.

"Many parents are asking for more time to clear school fees, and usually the school requires full payment at the beginning of term, though we are sometimes lenient and allow learners in school even when they haven't completed the balance," he explained.

However, Mr Hillary Migadde, the head teacher of Skyways Junior School in Nansana, was pleased even though only 50 percent of the learners there showed up yesterday.

FIRST TERM DURATION

According to the national school calendar for this year, set by the Ministry of Education and Sports, the first term is scheduled to run from February 10 until May 1, 2026.

In a January 16 statement, the ministry postponed reopening of the first term due to the 2026 General Election (held between January 15 and February 6) and the need to ensure the safety of millions of learners across the country.

"According to our enrolment, at least 50 percent of our learners have reported. We expect the rest to turn up the next day," Mr Migadde said. He stated that teaching had begun and that the school continues to receive more learners.

He stressed that the school allows in

any learner, who has paid at least part of the tuition fees regardless of which percentage. "We don't have fixed amount that you have to come with 50 percent, you can come in with some amount that you have for the start and continue paying in instalment [up to the end] of the term," Mr Migadde said.

Mr Siraje Magala, the head teacher of Zam Zam Primary School Nabweru in Nansana Municipality, Wakiso District, said the day's attendance was not good, adding that only 30 percent of the learners reported yesterday. He attributing the low turnout to financial constraints.

"Parents are telling us that they have not yet accessed the finances. However, we are encouraging them to bring the children and talk to the administration and agree on when that money can be deposited," he said.

Mr Magala added: "We have the school fees policy, but sometimes we don't go by the policy, but according to the situation. You find yourself adjusting depending on how one has come and how they promise to clear."

He urged parents to go to school and talk with school administration, discuss their payment plans rather than keeping learners at home.

Mr Nicholas Oyata, the principal of St Julian High School Gayaza, said the candidate classes returned on February 8, while the rest of the classes were expected on Monday, but so far, 50 percent of the learners have reported back and more continue to arrive.

"I don't know whether people overspent because of elections, but day one is not good. We expect students to clear 80 percent of tuition fees, but we bend a little when a parent has more than one child, or when the fees deposited is close to 80 percent of the total amount," he said.

Mr Oyata added: "Our parents have over the time understood our system. They call before they set off," he asserted. "We now have a small number of parents who walk to the head teacher's office over fees issues, much as the office is open to address their concerns."

Ms Reilla Kazibwe, a resident of Makindye in Kampala, whose two children go to Nakasero Primary School, said letting her pay for requirements in instalments had relieved her of stress.

"I have one in Primary Seven and I have registered the second one in Primary One. The candidate has already reported. They have allowed me to pay half of the money for lunch and I will bring the balance when I get it. I'm yet to get the requirements for the one in Primary One," Ms Kazibwe said.