

New beginning. The transition from Primary Seven to Senior One is one of the most decisive and stressful moments in a child's education journey. Yet it receives far less attention than performance rankings and lists of top schools, even though it often determines whether a child proceeds smoothly to secondary education, joins late, or drops out altogether.



Ongoing selection process at UMA Show Grounds in Lugogo. PHOTO/GEOFREY MUTUMBA

Senior One placement anxiety

As thousands of families celebrate Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) results, many are quietly grappling with a far more difficult question where, and whether, their children will continue with secondary education.

BY BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA

For many Ugandan families, the release of Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) results marks the end of one struggle and the beginning of another.

The joy that follows good grades is often short-lived, quickly replaced by fear, confusion and financial panic as parents confront the reality of Senior One placement.

PLE results are expected to bring relief and celebration. In many communities, neighbours gather to congratulate successful candidates, phones buzz with messages, and proud parents announce aggregates with a mixture of disbelief and joy.

But for a growing number of households, that happiness fades quickly. Within days, sometimes even hours, celebration gives way to anxiety as families begin the difficult search for secondary schools, school fees and clarity about what comes next.

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Yet it receives far less attention than performance rankings and lists of top schools, even though it often determines whether a child proceeds smoothly to secondary education, joins late, or drops out altogether.

The placement process

After results are released, many parents expect a clear and predictable path to secondary school. Instead, they encounter a placement process that feels complex and intimidating, particularly for families experiencing it for the first time.

In theory, learners are placed according to their performance and the choices made during the PLE registration process. In practice, the system is shaped by limited school capacity, varying cut-off points and affordability.

As demand for places in government-aided secondary schools continues to grow, competition becomes intense, leaving many families unprepared for the outcome.

Urban parents, particularly those with access to internet-enabled phones, social networks and physical proximity to schools, are often able to follow placement lists closely and act quickly. In rural areas, information spreads slowly, largely through word of mouth, leaving families uncertain about deadlines, vacancies and requirements.

By the time some parents fully understand what is required, places in preferred schools have already been taken. This information gap has become one of the quiet drivers of inequality in access to secondary education.

One of the most painful realities for many families is discovering that a good PLE result does not automatically guarantee placement in a quality secondary school.

Rehema Kisitu Lutalo, the head teacher of Mariam High School, a government-aided USE school, says demand for Senior One places consistently exceeds supply. She explains that the school has about 250 vacancies for Senior One students each year and admits learners from the best grades up to aggregate 28 under the USE programme. For these students, the government provides a capitation grant and covers UNEB registration fees.

Learners who obtain aggregates 29 and 30 may also be admitted to government-aided schools, but only as private students. In such cases, the government does not provide capita-

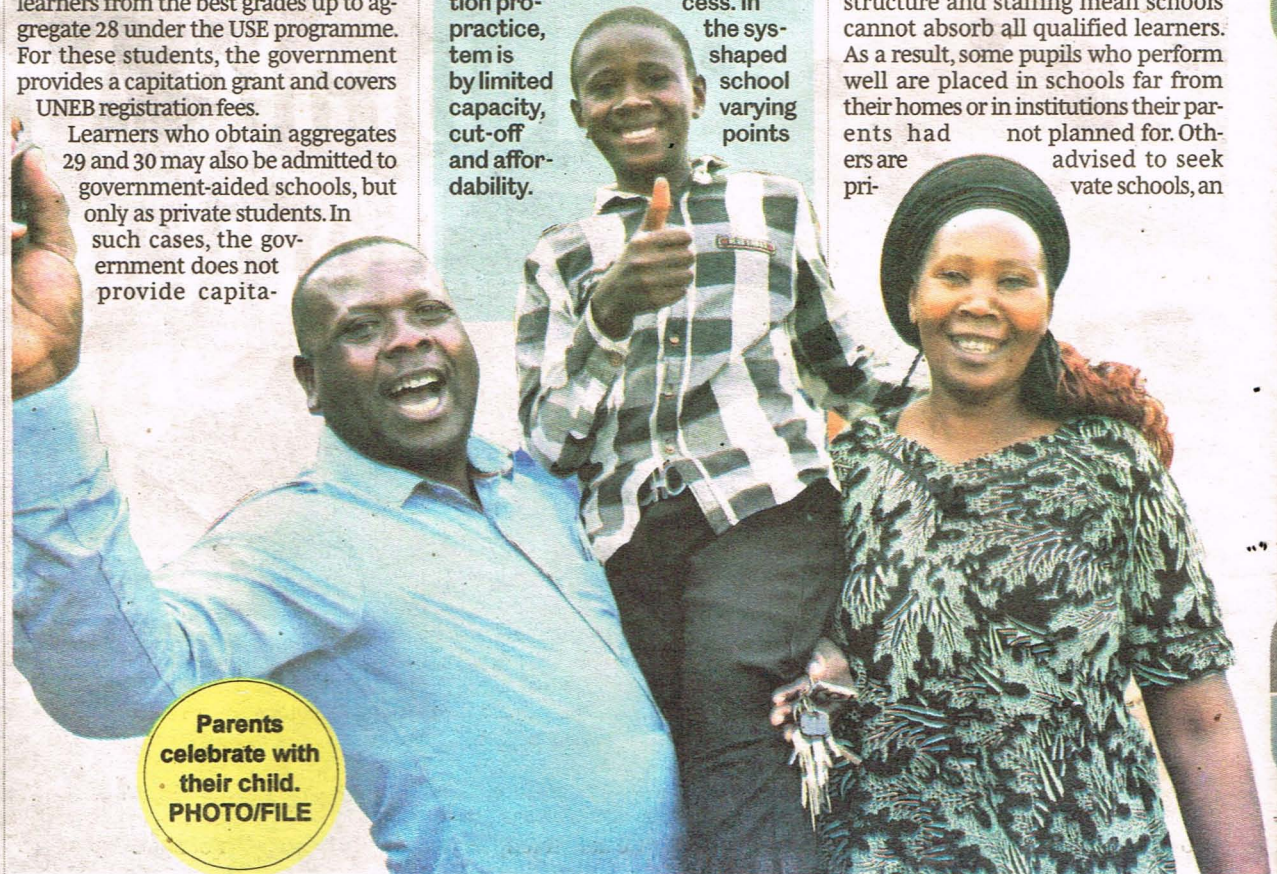
KEY ADVICE

Before accepting a placement, parents should confirm whether their child has been admitted as a USE or private student, as this determines the long-term cost of education. In theory, learners are placed according to their performance and the choices made during the PLE registration process. In practice, the system is shaped by limited school capacity, cut-off points and affordability.

tion grants or pay examination registration fees, leaving parents to shoulder the full cost.

"In many cases, the demand exceeds our capacity, but we go an extra mile and enroll as many students as possible," Lutalo says. "Quality education is not only about four-walled infrastructure. We can improvise, even using temporary spaces, and address challenges as they come."

Despite such efforts, limited infrastructure and staffing mean schools cannot absorb all qualified learners. As a result, some pupils who perform well are placed in schools far from their homes or in institutions their parents had not planned for. Others are advised to seek private schools, an

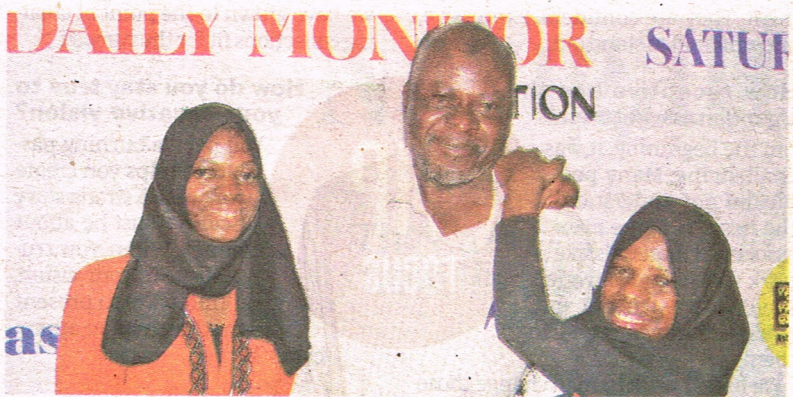


Parents celebrate with their child. PHOTO/FILE

When a good result is not enough



Pupils and teachers of Crane View Malaba celebrate after 12 candidates scored each aggregate 4. Below, celebrating good grades. PHOTOS/FILE.



option that is financially out of reach for many families.

The bigger challenge

At the heart of the placement challenge lies the issue of funding. Although Uganda's free education policy has expanded access, the government's capitation grant remains low, making it difficult for schools to operate effectively.

The capitation grant is intended to cover essential operational needs such as instructional materials, co-curricular activities, administration and basic school management. Currently, the government allocates about Shs58,000 per term for each O-Level student. School administrators say this amount is insufficient, especially given the rising cost of goods and services.

As a result, many government-aided schools charge additional fees to cover lunch, development projects and teacher allowances. These charges, often referred to as "requirements," are a major source of tension between schools and parents.

"The teacher-to-student ratio in government schools is usually very low," Lutalo explains. "To maintain teaching standards, schools sometimes have to hire additional teachers, and that cost ends up being shared with parents."

David Bbale, the head teacher of Kakoma Secondary School in Rakai District, echoes this concern. "The more students we enroll, the more capitation grant we receive, but the government does not cater for feeding or uniforms," he says. "Parents have to incur these costs."

For families that were expecting secondary education to be largely free, these expenses come as a shock.

Why some students miss out

Beyond funding constraints, guid-

ance at primary school level plays a significant role in shaping placement outcomes. According to Lutalo, many pupils are not adequately guided when selecting secondary school choices.

"Some pupils apply to schools with similar cut-off points without understanding how competitive those schools are," she says. "If a learner does not select a school as a first choice, they may miss out on a vacancy. In other cases, affordability becomes a barrier, especially where learners apply to non-USE government schools with higher fees."

When children fail to secure places in their preferred schools, the emotional impact can be significant. Parents and schools are then left with the responsibility of helping learners adjust to new environments and expectations. Denis Noah Mubiru, a parent, says counselling is critical at this stage.

"The children need to be supported to fit into the new environment," he says. "For a Senior One student, everything is new — the school, teachers and teaching methods. All these bring excitement and anxiety at the same time, and every child responds differently."

Academic adjustment and new expectations

Secondary schools also face the challenge of addressing gaps in learners' preparedness. Lutalo notes that many students arrive in Senior One lacking basic digital skills, including simple computer use, requiring schools to invest time in remedial teaching.

At the same time, parents often struggle to understand the new competence-based curriculum, which places greater emphasis on skills development rather than purely academic performance.

"Many parents still measure success using the old academic mindset," Lutalo observes. "They are not yet fully fa-



Dr John C Muyingo, the minister of State for Higher Education at the official opening of the Senior One selection and placement exercise at the UMA Show Grounds in Lugogo on Thursday. PHOTO/GEOFFREY MUTUMBA.

QUICK NOTES.

USE or private? When learners are admitted to government-aided secondary schools, they may join under either Universal Secondary Education or private which affects what parents pay.

USE: Government provides a capitation grant to the school to support basic operations and also pays UNEB registration fees. Admission is based on set aggregate cut-offs and limited slots.

Private students: When USE slots are filled, schools may admit additional learners as private candidates. For these students, the government provides no financial support, meaning parents must pay full school fees and examination registration costs.

miliar with the competence-based approach. This gap needs to be bridged so that parents can appreciate the broader efforts teachers are making."

The financial shock

For many households, the most immediate challenge after placement is financial. Even in USE schools, parents are often required to pay for uniforms, buckets, development contributions and meals.

"I was told it is a government school, but when I added everything, it was more than Shs400,000," says Ms Sarah Akello, a parent. "I sell cassava. Where was I supposed to get that money at once?"

Private schools present an even heavier burden. Admission fees, multiple uniforms, transport costs and boarding requirements quickly push expenses beyond the reach of low-income families. In households with more than one school-going child, parents are often forced to make painful decisions about who continues with education.

Urban advantage

The contrast between urban and rural experiences during placement remains stark. In towns and cities, parents are more likely to physically visit schools, follow up on vacancies and negotiate requirements. In rural areas, families often travel long distances only to find that places are already filled.

With limited fare and access to information, rural parents are more likely to accept whatever option is available, even if it is not ideal for the child.

This imbalance continues to reinforce long-standing inequalities in access to secondary education. As Uganda celebrates another cohort of PLE candidates, a critical question remains: how many children will make it to Senior One without losing hope along the way? Until the challenges surrounding placement are addressed, for many families, the real examination will continue long after the results are announced.

