

EDUCATION MINISTRY SPEAKS OUT ON PLE GRADES

By John Musenze

The Ministry of Education and Sports has dismissed allegations that the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) favours rural schools over those in Kampala, describing the claims as baseless.

In a statement issued following the release of the 2025 Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) results on January 30, permanent secretary Kedrace Turyagyenda said UNEB applies a non-discriminatory marking and grading system designed to ensure fairness for all candidates, regardless of their location or school status.

CONTROVERSY

The allegations emerged after many so-called big schools in Kampala did not register any candidate with aggregate 4 as seen with the majority of the 4s registered in rural-based schools or outside central region.

This was followed by claims on mainstream and social media suggesting that UNEB deliberately favoured rural and Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools at the expense of elite urban institutions.

Turyagyenda said such narratives are neither new nor consistent, maintaining that UNEB's marking and grading processes are designed to ensure transparency, equity and credibility in assessing Uganda's primary school candidates.

"In the 1980s through to the 2010s, there were persistent rumours that traditional and elite primary schools in the central region were being favoured over upcountry and rural schools. In recent years, the narrative has reversed, now claiming that UNEB is discriminating against elite schools in Kampala in favour of rural UPE schools," she said in a statement.

ANONYMOUS MARKING

According to the permanent secretary, UNEB assigns random numbers to districts and schools before the marking exercise begins, where each school and subject is given a unique code, making it impossible for examiners to identify the origin of a script.

"Examiners do not know which school they are marking at any given time. Even the names of candidates are not reliable indicators of the school they come from," Turyagyenda noted.

She noted that the anonymity of scripts is further reinforced by the distribution of examiners, who are recruited from across the country where Kampala and its surrounding districts contribute the highest proportion of examiners compared to upcountry areas.

"If there were any bias, why would examiners from the central region deliberately undermark their own schools or districts?" she asked.

According to the ministry, UNEB develops a single

CANDIDATES' PERFORMANCE

Out of the 817,883 candidates who registered for PLE in 2025, 807,313 candidates sat for the exams, while 10,570 learners failed to turn up.

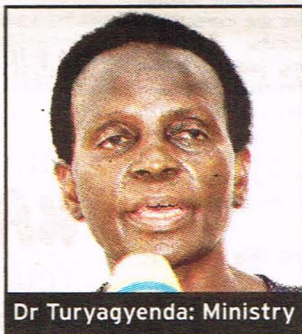
Of the those who sat for the exams, 91,990 pupils passed in Division One, 388,293 in Division Two, 165,226 in Division Three, and 84,724 in Division Four.

This implies that a total of 730,233 of the 2025 PLE candidates qualify to progress to the next level of education, compared to 722,730 candidates who qualified in 2024.

According to UNEB, English had the highest percentage of candidates (18.5%) demonstrating higher ability levels, followed by mathematics (16.4%), and social studies with religious education (15.9%).

Higher ability is when a candidate can remember the facts, show an understanding of those facts and they are able to apply the facts in problem solving.

In addition, two-thirds of the candidates exhibited medium ability level in all four subjects, while the percentage of candidates who exhibited lower ability levels in all the four subjects was at 16%.



Dr Turyagyenda: Ministry

marking guide for each subject to ensure consistency, which is discussed and agreed upon collectively by the team of examiners assigned to that subject. Thereafter, senior examiners supervise the marking teams to ensure that

the agreed marking guide is applied uniformly across all scripts, which prevents individual interpretation or deviation from the agreed standards.

UNIFORM GUIDELINES

"It is not possible for randomly assigned examiners, working in different centres and marking anonymous scripts, to collude in undermarking learners from a particular school, district or region," she said.

Turyagyenda noted that UNEB also uses what it describes as a "conveyor belt system" of marking, under which no single examiner marks an entire script. Instead, different sections of the same

script are marked by different examiners. She questioned the logic behind claims of systematic discrimination under such a system.

"What is the probability that randomly assigned examiners from various districts, marking different questions in the same script, would collude to favour or undermine learners from a particular school?" she asked.

The ministry also pointed to performance data from the 2025 PLE cycle, which shows that pass rates among learners from Kampala and surrounding districts remain higher than those of learners from rural schools.

"If UNEB were favouring rural schools, would we see higher pass rates in Kampala?" she asked.

Turyagyenda acknowledged, however, that fewer candidates attained aggregate 4 in 2025 compared to 2024. The decline, she explained, reflects a deliberate shift in assessment design rather than discriminatory grading.

Over the past few years, UNEB has moved away from questions that primarily test recall and instead emphasised items that require deeper thinking, analysis and application.

"The end-of-cycle exams are simply a mirror. If learners are not being prepared to think critically and apply knowledge, the results will reflect that," Turyagyenda said.

The permanent secretary urged parents and guardians

to take a greater interest in the teaching and assessment methods used in their children's schools, stressing that examination outcomes are influenced by classroom practices and not by the cost of school fees.

PARENTS ADVISED

"The parents and guardians concerned should know that UNEB employees also have children and grandchildren in schools within Kampala. So, why would UNEB itself create a marking system that disadvantages their own children and grandchildren - is it logical at all?"

She also challenged what she described as a falsehood that urban schools charging higher fees should automatically outperform rural or UPE schools.

"The amount of school fees one pays is not a predictor of a learner's academic performance. We must not allow such beliefs to gain traction," she said.

PUBLIC TRUST

The ministry warned that persistent allegations of bias risk undermining public trust in the country's national examinations system without evidence.

"Any belief that a national examination agency administers a preferential examinations system that favours one learner, school or district over another is simply not logical," Turyagyenda said.