

Ensure swimming and water safety in schools

On February 15, 10-year-old Sharon Wanyonze drowned in a swimming pool at a resort located in Bukaya West Village, Njeru Municipality, Buikwe District. Sharon's guardian had taken her and another child for leisure swimming at the resort.

Police say the guardian handed the two children to a swimming pool attendant for safekeeping while he stepped away to make a phone call. He returned 15 minutes later, discovered that Sharon was missing, and only for her body to be found in the pool.

While this particular drowning incident did not occur at school or during a school event, it triggers memories of all the young lives that have been lost to drowning, especially while at school or at school events, and especially now that the school term is in progress.

It is commonplace for schools these days to have swimming pools or have swimming arrangements for students that usually take place at hotels or other such facilities. Because of this, it is imperative that the safety of students/learners is prioritised. Pool attendants and lifeguards at these pools must be vetted and found to be qualified and responsible enough to prioritise the safety of these children.

The issue:

Drowning.

Our view:

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Last year left us reeling from the loss of young lives due to drowning. On August 3, 2025, Kevin Nsamba, a Senior Six student at Seeta High School, drowned during swimming practice at the school's Mbalala Campus in Mukono District. In October of the same year, a Senior Three student at St Mary's College Kisubi died after drowning in the school's swimming pool. The student, Peter Kirwana, allegedly drowned while taking part in swimming lessons.

Recently, a first-year student pursuing a Bachelor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Uganda Christian University drowned in a swimming pool in Kirowoza, Mukono District. According to a 2024/2025 report by the Makerere University School of Public Health, more than 3000 people drown annually in Uganda.

Behind all these names and cases are broken dreams, lives cut short, and families stricken with insurmountable grief. While these incidents can happen away from school, as seen in Sharon's case,

today, we specifically call upon all institutions of learning, which have immense influence and custodianship over the bulk of our young people, to be very diligent in enforcing safety and guarding against drowning, and equip swimming instructors and pool operators with lifesaving skills.

Allan Kiiza, a drowning prevention expert and public health scholar, in an opinion article published in the *Daily Monitor* of February 9 titled, "Drowning in Uganda: Silent crisis escalating in schools," makes some valid policy recommendations that we must heed.

He writes, "For meaningful change to occur, school proprietors and the Ministry of Education and Sports must act decisively. The ministry should establish mandatory national standards for school swimming pools, covering licensing, safety manuals, staffing qualifications, and inspection schedules. Swimming and water safety must be recognised as essential life skills, not optional extras. School proprietors, in turn, must prioritise safety over aesthetics or competition. Investment in trained personnel, proper documentation, and continuous certification is not an expense—it is a responsibility."