

# UPE schools are fit for govt-funded pre-primary system

From local advocates to global organisations, there is a clear consensus; public investment in early learning pays off. It levels the playing field for disadvantaged children and significantly lowers school dropout rates. Yet this critical foundation is still missing in Uganda because public pre-primary education is currently unavailable.

Uganda's Education Act states that pre-primary education institutions are to be run by private agencies or persons, and the financing of pre-primary education is a responsibility of the parents or guardians.

Due to the lack of public pre-primary education, only 9 percent of pre-primary-aged children attend a licensed and registered pre-primary school, and more than 60 percent of pre-primary-aged children in Uganda are not attending any type of school, according to UNICEF

The limited access is large-

tional materials and teacher salaries since these educators are not on the government payroll.

Ultimately, these costs fall on parents and guardians, effectively excluding the most vulnerable children from education. For families relying on subsistence farming, such financial burdens are often insurmountable.

Investment in pre-primary education is a strategic economic move for Uganda. UNICEF and World Bank studies corroborate this. While investing in early years is vital for Uganda's human capital, the report of Uganda's Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) highlights a significant performance gap compared to regional peers. Unlike Uganda, Kenya has made pre-primary education free and compulsory. In Tanzania, each primary school has a pre-primary classroom financed out of capitation grants provided to primary schools.

Uganda is considering a new Public-Private Partnership (PPP) to expand pre-primary education, a move proposed in a recently validated World Bank-supported study. The proposal—which involves the government paying the salaries of three teachers per private school—is framed as financially sustainable and broadens stakeholder engagement, including the private sector and communities. However, this strategy ignores the “miserable failure” of the PPP model used for rolling Universal Secondary Education (USE), which was so unsuccessful that the government was forced to phase it out entirely.

PPPs are a flawed model for education. Research by ISER into the phase-out of PPPs in Universal Secondary Education (USE) identified several critical failures: **inequality**, where hidden costs made schools inaccessible to the poor; **poor oversight**, where several institutions relied on unqualified and underpaid teachers; **exclusion**: There was a lack of reasonable accommodation for children with disabilities; and **eroded public duty**, where for-profit models compromise the State's obligation to provide free, quality education.

As Uganda moves toward publicly funded pre-primary education, leveraging existing UPE schools offers the most viable path for a sustainable and equitable rollout.

## Public-private partnerships ... are a flawed model for education.



**Angella Kasule**

Education

ly attributed to the absence of pre-primary schools in several communities, especially rural areas, and the prohibitive costs in areas with pre-primary schools, according to research by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER).

To address the significant gap in pre-primary education, particularly in rural areas, schools implementing the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Programme are improvising by constructing dedicated structures or repurposing classrooms to cater to children entering primary one without any prior school experience. However, school administrators, according to research conducted by ISER, report that this imposes a heavy financial burden because they must directly fund instruc-