

By Henry Nsubuga

The Government has issued a firm directive ordering all primary schools to immediately halt the automatic promotion of learners and ensure that progression to the next class is strictly based on merit.

The order was delivered on Thursday by Joyce Moriku Kaducu, the state minister for primary education, during a meeting with 187 government primary school headteachers in Mukono district.

"Immediately stop the automatic promotion of learners. Those going to Primary Seven (P7) must be promoted on merit," Kaducu directed. "We do not want to hear at the end of the year about high failure rates attached to learners who were pushed and pushed. Are they wheelbarrows? Let us get serious and make education a reality."

The directive reinforces an earlier government position to review the long-standing practice of automatic promotion, which has seen learners advanced to the next class regardless of academic performance. While the Ministry of Education had signalled a policy shift in 2024, many schools reportedly continued the practice, treating it as established government policy.

During the release of the 2023 Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) results in February 2024, the First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, Mrs Janet Museveni, observed that there was a high number of candidates who did not attain the grades required to pass.

During the release, which was held at State House, Nakasero, Mrs Museveni announced that the ministry would review the arrangement where learners were being promoted to the next class before attaining the minimum knowledge and skills as evidence of learning.

"It is a disservice to move a learner to the next level when you, as a teacher or headteacher, very well know that the child has not demonstrated minimum mastery of the appropriate knowledge and skills in the previous class," she said.

"Promoting a learner to the next class simply because the year has come to an end is a disservice to that child, to education and the country," Mrs Museveni added.

On Thursday, Kaducu stressed that promoting unprepared learners wastes time and resources and ultimately contributes to high failure rates at the end-of-cycle examinations.

"Why should a learner who has failed be promoted to the next class only to fail at PLE and be unable to proceed? That system must stop," she ordered.

Kaducu added that the First

GOVT WARNS SCHOOLS ON AUTOMATIC PROMOTION

PHOTO BY HENRY NSUBUGA



Mugomba Primary School headteacher Gashegu Murama addressing Moriku during the meeting in Mukono



Joyce Moriku Kaducu

Lady and Minister for Education and Sports, Mrs Museveni, would also pronounce herself on the matter.

The meeting, held at St Joseph Mixed Primary School, Naggalama in Nakifuma, Naggalama Town Council, sought to review the implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme.

Besides headteachers, the event was attended by top officials, including Dr Safina Mutumba, the assistant commissioner for pre-primary education at the ministry; Hajat Fatuma Ndisaba Nabitaka, the Mukono resident district commissioner (RDC); Henry Ddamba, the chief administrative officer (CAO); and Rashid Kikomeko, the district education officer (DEO).

Headteachers responded that automatic promotion had been treated as a government policy and that their earlier complaints

TEACHER SHORTAGE AND LAND DISPUTES

Mukono district education officer Rashid Kikomeko revealed that the district has gone over five years without a functioning District Service Commission, limiting recruitment.

The district's approved staffing ceiling stands at 1,758, but there is a shortfall of 249 teachers. And of the 187 headteachers, only 87 are substantively appointed, while just 112 deputy headteachers hold substantive positions.

Chief Administrative Officer Henry Ddamba said the district had secured permission to use the DSC of neighbouring Buvuma district to recruit staff.

"While we may not fill all 249 vacancies

immediately, we plan to recruit at least 100 teachers in the meantime," he said.

RDC Hajat Fatuma Ndisaba also highlighted land disputes affecting several schools. She cited Nakagere UMEA Primary School, where part of the land was allegedly sold by relatives of the original donor to a Member of Parliament who has since constructed a house on the school playground. The matter is before court.

Ndisaba called on the Government to consider purchasing land for schools threatened by encroachment, noting that a similar intervention resolved a dispute at Kiwanga UMEA Primary School.

regarding it had not been addressed.

One headteacher noted that the practice is largely confined to government schools, unlike private institutions, where promotion is strictly merit-based, contributing to better performance.

The automatic promotion policy was part of the implementation guidelines for UPE in 1997.

The policy was later backed by several ministry circulars, such as one in 2007 and 2008.

However, Mutumba clarified that there was no written policy supporting automatic promotion. She said the practice emerged during the tenure of former education minister Namirembe Bitamazire, but was never formalised into policy.

Florence Nakyagaba, the

headteacher of Bajjo Primary School, welcomed the ministry's policy on promotions, saying it was long overdue.

"In some areas, it has not been automatic promotion, though in many schools it has been automatic. We have been having many ungraded pupils in PLE just because of this idea of automatic promotion. Some students were not attending school well, knowing that they would be promoted at the end of the year. We have been producing half-baked children just because of automatic promotion," she said.

MUKONO'S 2025 PLE PERFORMANCE

According to the 2025 PLE results, Mukono district registered 16,535 candidates, up from 16,450 in 2024. Of

these, 2,658 passed in Division One, 8,538 in Division Two, 2,719 in Division Three, while 1,303 were in Division Four.

Under the UNEB system, only candidates who pass in the above divisions qualify to proceed to the next level of education.

There were 1,049 candidates who were ungraded and, therefore, considered failures, while 268 registered candidates did not sit the examination.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Despite government efforts to pay salaries on time and improve infrastructure, headteachers cited persistent challenges affecting performance.

Gashegu Murama, the headteacher of Mugomba Primary School in Mpatta sub-county, said teachers are

WAY FORWARD

Dr Safina Mutumba, the assistant commissioner for pre-primary education at the education ministry, argued that salary increments alone would not solve performance challenges, noting that even well-paid science teachers in secondary schools have not necessarily delivered improved results.

Joyce Moriku Kaducu, the state minister for primary education, described the Mukono engagement as the first in a series of direct consultations with headteachers across districts. She said she would compile a report for the First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, Mrs Janet Museveni. She also promised to arrange a meeting between headteacher representatives from the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area and the minister soon.

"We are seeking practical solutions that will improve performance in government schools," Kaducu said.

unfairly blamed for poor results, despite challenges beyond their control.

He said Nakasenyi and Nakaswa Church of Uganda primary schools are operating without roofs after a hailstorm deroofed their classrooms, forcing learners to study in open spaces.

Murama added that overcrowding remains a serious issue, with some classrooms accommodating two classes simultaneously, making it difficult to retain high-performing learners.

Fatuma Ndisaba, the headteacher of Namanoga UMEA Primary School, said schools are compelled to charge parents informal fees to cope with staffing shortages and competition from private schools.

"Some schools run from P1 to P7 with only four teachers, including the headteacher. When we alert the district, there is no response. Through school management committees and PTA meetings, parents agree to contribute modest fees to feed learners and hire private teachers," she said.

Headteachers also decried low salaries, arguing that many teachers struggle to educate their own children, pay medical bills and meet transport costs, especially in schools without staff accommodation.