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BY MONITOR TEAM

Several public primary schools in the countryside have continued to record low attendance of learners despite the first academic term entering its second month.

Schools officially opened the 2026 First Term on February 10, following a postponement from the original reporting date due to the January 15 General Election. First Term will close on May 1.

A countrywide survey by this publication this week reveals that some learners have not yet reported to their respective schools.

It is not yet clear if the no-show is a result of lack of school fees, scholastic materials, or the learners enrolled in other schools.

For example, at Muganza Primary School in Kisoro District, the school head teacher, Mr Gideon Mugisha, says only 898 pupils out of the expected 1,020 have so far reported for the First Term.

His counterpart at Andeni Primary School in Maracha District, Mr Dick Azaga, says some of the learners are still at home and the parents have not taken the responsibility to send them back to school.

He says the school had an enrolment of 1,500 pupils last year, but since the beginning of the term, only 1,000 have reported. "Parents have a negative attitude towards the education of their children in our community here. Even the children we already have at school are not catered for in terms of provision of scholastic materials, feeding, medication, among other issues," Mr Azaga says.

In Nebbi, the district isn't doing well in terms of completion rate, according to a report from the district Education Department.

As schools resumed a month ago, the district has also registered low turnout of learners even in the second month.

### Why the drop

Some of the factors advanced for the dropout rate include early marriages, poverty, and a lack of basic sanitary facilities for the girls, demoralising pupils, as well as a lack of support from parents, and child labour.

According to the same report, child marriage in Nebbi District stands at 14.5 percent. This means that out of 100 girls, 14 get married off.

In Apac District, pupils are intentionally dodging lessons to help their parents in the gardens.

Mr Francis Okunyu, the head teacher of Ilee Primary School in Chegere Sub-county, says their enrolment was very high before the onset of the first rainy season, but now the class attendance is irregular.

"We had many pupils at school, but when we started receiving rainfall last week, many of them are now at home helping their parents to work in the gardens," he says.

At Apele Primary School in Ibutje Sub-county, the head teacher, Mr Jolly Joe Ogwang, says the turn up is high, but is worried that it may drop once they start asking parents and guardians to complete payment of examination fees.

"We started recording the high enrolment in the second and the third week of Term One, but we are worried it may

# Why daily attendance has dropped in primary schools



A teacher addresses pupils of Bugongi Primary School in Kabale Town during a parade on Wednesday. The head teacher, Mr Henry Mayanja, says current enrolment is 331 but an average of 25 learners are absent on a daily basis. PHOTO/ ROBERT MUHEREZA

drop when the exams draw closer because it's now a trend," he says.

Mr Richard Abongo, the head teacher of Alworoceng Primary School, also in Ibutje Sub-county, says poor infrastructure is another reason they are registering low learner attendance.

"At our school, the five-stance pit latrine for girls has been closed due to its current poor state, and now we have only one available for more than 700 girls. This discourages some girls from school, especially the adolescent girls," he says.

In Nwoya District, the severely low turnout of learners has left its education authorities scratching their heads for solutions. For example, less than 40 percent of pupils have reported back to school at Corom Camguru, Te-dam and Kochlii primary schools.

"Teachers are here in school, but we struggle with this huge problem of absenteeism since children are not coming to school. A teacher gets to a class with an enrollment of 80 and finds only five learners," Ms Rosemary Ajok, a teacher at Te-dam Primary School, says.

Mr James Boniface Achellam, the district inspector of schools, describes the situation as worrying.

"In the first week, we recorded a big number of schools that did not register a single learner," Mr Achellam says.

Mr Achellam explains that they established that parents are keeping children in the gardens instead of sending them to school.

"Our parents tell the learners to support them in their farming activities, because this is a peasant population where children work in the garden, and don't come to school. In many cases, children can even be away for three or four days, they come back, and nobody puts them to task to explain, he says.

To tackle the problem, Mr Achellam says they are now carrying out engagements with parents from school-to-school to sensitise and mobilise them to take their children to school.

Last week, the education department of Nwoya embarked on a community sensitisation drive aimed at rallying parents to send children to school.

At Kibibi Primary School, located in the rural setting of Jinja District, pupils spend nearly a month of First Term without fully attending classes. Some of this low attendance is attributed to shortage of teachers at the school.

"The challenge we have here is a lack of teachers. Our staff ceiling is 18 teachers, but only 13 are available, yet parents have endeavoured to bring all children back to school," Mr Joseph Sibukule, the school head teacher, says. He adds:

"In fact, I am also forced to teach to help close the gaps, but we still feel the burden of the heavy workload."

In Luuka District, Mr Godfrey Birumbu, the head teacher of Bugabula Primary School, says the school was expecting about 800 pupils at the start of the term, but only 620 have so far reported.

In the Ankole Sub-region, educationists have decried the delay of pupils to report back to school as classrooms remain empty.

According to Mr Stephen Biru Warufu, the Rubirizi District education officer, most families are poor and as a result, it is the children who work as casual labourers to plant beans, maize, and other crops.

"Most schools do not prepare food for the learners, and being a basic need, especially for orphans and the ones from poor families, children cannot stay in school without food. This is a reason they have to first scavenge before reporting to school," he says, adding, "It's only children from rich households who can afford food and report immediately as the term commences."

Mr Deo Muhwezi, the senior education officer for Mbarara District, says: "Some parents still see their children as a source of labour at the expense of their education. They send them out to sell food-

stuffs in trading centres to raise money needed for scholastic materials before reporting to school which has affected their education.

Mr Justus Nkwasiwwe, the head teacher of Nyakayojo Primary School, says class attendance is still low compared to last year.

The Ntungamo District Senior Education Inspector of Schools, Mr Fred Bahati, says most rural schools have not recorded a 50 percent learner turnout despite the school term entering its second month. "Some parents don't send pupils to school early enough; they delay for up to three weeks or a month. This year, our assessment reveals that most pupils in rural schools had not reported in the first three weeks," he says.

Mr John Chrysostom Muyingo, the State minister for Higher Education, wonders why parents are still keeping their children at home when tuition-free public primary schools can absorb them. He says the ministry has played its part by providing all the necessary funding, human resources, among others, to facilitate the smooth running of all schools under the free education scheme.

"Parents are the ones to blame; it's illegal to abuse the children's right to education. The government has created a conducive environment with schools now very close to their homes, where they can take children to access education, even if some requirements are not provided by the government, parents can still talk to head teachers to allow their children to study as they look for them," he says.

Mr Johnson Abakunda, the Ibanda Municipality education officer, says some schools have recorded low turnout because learners were enrolled elsewhere at the start of the term.

"I have visited schools in the area and found out that where the number dropped in one school, it increased in the other. We also have challenges with private schools that fail to give us the exact enrollment figures. We have organised sensitisation meetings with school heads to discuss how we can address this problem," he says.

Mr Kenneth N Tusingwire, the head teacher of Nyakikoni Primary School in Kanungu District who doubles as chairperson of the Uganda National Teachers Union (Unatu) for Kanungu District, says by the end of 2025, enrollment stood at 562 pupils, but 456 have reported so far.

However, Ms Kellen Ayeabazibwe, the principal inspector of schools in Mbarara District, says good corroboration among stakeholders has helped them improve daily attendance in schools.

"We are working with other departments like community development, security, and local leaders to sensitise communities on the importance of education. Our UPE schools even in rural areas, are very competitive with private schools in performance," she says.

### HIGH TURNOUT IN SOME PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The head teacher at Kizinga Primary School in Kabale District, Mr Peter Ampurira, says pupils' enrollment has instead increased from 480 last year to 510. He attributes this to the recent closure of a nearby private primary school and the conducive teaching and learning environment at his school.

In the eastern district of Bugiri, teachers are also overwhelmed by the

large turnout of pupils, which has forced some to study under trees due to a shortage of classrooms. Mr Apasher Sanya, the head teacher of Namayemba Church of Uganda Primary School, said pupil numbers have increased from 873 to 1,523.

"Some of them [pupils], especially in the lower classes, are studying under the mango tree as we wait for the district to construct additional classrooms," he says, adding that the school also lacks staff houses, and desks.

Mr Simon Opolot, the inspector of schools in Soroti City, also says pupils' daily attendance is gradually improving, but the only issue at hand is that the parents are not cooperating in giving data needed for the Education Management Information System (EMIS) registration. Mr Opolot says the registration helps in the government's budgeting processes. He explains that last year, 2,304 out of 23,578 of the total enrollment of learners did not register in the EMIS.

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