

What next after govt frowns upon automatic promotion?

The move has sparked debate on the quality of education, with experts urging reforms to improve learning, retention and transition from primary to secondary schools.

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After realising that a big number of primary school children were barely completing the primary school education cycle, despite the availability of free primary education, the government opted for the automatic promotion policy in 2005.

This was part of its strategy to improve learners' retention and check school dropouts and repetition, which was taking a huge toll on the government's meagre resources.

The policy advocated for mass promotion, where learners, including those who did not pass promotional examinations, were given a green light to proceed to the next classes, despite their poor performance.

Although stakeholders in the education sector were aware that primary level retention rates were a major concern, with almost a million pupils dropping out between P1 and P7, and with school retention rates below 50 percent in some areas, the policy received mixed reactions.

Some opposed the policy, reasoning that it would nurture half-baked pupils. Such proponents suggested areas that needed to be improved to bridge the gaps. Elsewhere, others backed the policy on account that it would improve transitional rates.

As more than 800,000 candidates prepared to write 2025 Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) last year, Dr Hamis Mugendawala, the Director for Population and Social Development Planning at the National Planning Authority (NPA), indicated in the clearest terms that an examination-oriented approach that either rewarded or punished was counterproductive.

He noted that it disadvantages learners who fail to attain the pass mark.

Proposed changes

Dr Mugendawala asserted that the country's planning authority remains an ardent advocate for the removal of examinations, especially PLE, arguing that it contradicts the law, and denies millions of children an opportunity to transition to secondary school.

The statistics show, Dr Mugendawala proceeded to note, that currently about 10 to 15 percent of children who are subjected to writing PLE are forcefully asked to drop out due to failure to attain the requisite grades.

Records indicate that less than half (39.2 percent) of learners who sit for PLE ever transition to secondary.

"The National Planning Authority has been an ardent advocate of the remov-



Invigilators check pupils of Police Children's School, Kijuli, as they prepare to sit their first PLE paper on November 3, 2025. During the 2024 countrywide stakeholders' consultation meetings, there was a proposal to phase out PLE by 2027, paving the way for entry to Senior One being automatic. PHOTO/ABUBAKER LUBOWA

al of PLE because it is not required and it's against the law. The law says every young person has a right to basic education, those are 11 uninterrupted years, seven in Primary and four in lower secondary. If that is the law and in the middle you put a barrier (PLE) that forces children out of school, then it contracts the law," Dr Mugendawala, who represented the NPA Executive Director, Dr Joseph Muvawala during Education Plus Initiative symposium organised by the UN family in Kampala, said.

Dr Mugendawala explained that whereas the government policy is to keep children in school for at least 11 years, the average years of schooling have not gone beyond six.

"We are rotating around six and seven and we have a lot of wastage after P6 because of the gaming practices in schools where they select the best learners to go to P7 such that they can shine in PLE, letting those who are not, in their view, talented, to either repeat or voluntarily drop out of school," he said.

During the 2024 countrywide stakeholders' consultation meetings—undertaken by the Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC)—NPA officials who interfaced with the review commission also proposed the phasing out of PLE by 2027, paving the way for entry to Senior One being automatic.

The country's planning body suggested that the first national examination for matriculation should be conducted at Senior Four. (Uganda Certificate of Education) to align with the government policy of universal access to primary and secondary education.

While educationists say the low transition rate of learners from primary to secondary is a huge setback to the progress of the learners' education, Dr Mugendawala reckons the planning frameworks for improving adolescents and Uganda's Vision 2040 offers a ray of hope.

He said Vision 2040 emphasises that

DIRE STRAITS

Uganda faces a high primary school dropout rate, with approximately 42.8 percent to 45 percent of pupils failing to complete Primary Seven.

Roughly 43 out of every 100 pupils drop out before finishing primary school, with higher rates observed among girls (46.4 percent) and in rural areas. Key causes include poverty, child marriage, and high absenteeism.

Dr Kedrace Turgyagenda, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Sports, acknowledged that while Universal Primary Education and Universal Secondary Education have narrowed gender disparity, many adolescents—especially girls in rural areas—are confronted with barriers such as early marriages, gender based violence, poverty and limited access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Consequently, she called for collaborative approach to address challenges that keep children out of school.

every citizen should enjoy access to affordable, high-quality education and health care. It adds that health and education financing should be sustainable and inclusive, through public-private partnerships.

Change of heart

Yet, at a meeting with head teachers from Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) held at Nakasero Primary School on February 27, junior Education minister, Dr Joyce Moriku Kaducu, directed schools to abandon the directive, noting that there was no policy

that backs automatic promotion.

The meeting had been called to get to the bottom of the poor performance mustered by KCCA schools in PLE.

"Where is the policy? We don't have any written policy that supports automatic promotion of learners; learners are supposed to be promoted on merit," Minister Kaducu disclosed, adding that the promotion of learners who fail to grasp and comprehend content for the next level of education leads to high failure rates.

Records indicate 65,000 candidates who sat for 2025 PLE failed to secure placement into Senior One.

Dr Kaducu said many teachers misconceived the verbal message to not failing learners amid limited capitation grants given to schools implementing Universal Primary Education (UPE).

Dr Cleophus Mugenyi, the commissioner of basic education, stressed the need to prioritise remedial lessons to boost learning and criticised schoolteachers for the automatic promotion policy misconception.

"You cannot automatically push a child who cannot write his or her name, count from one to 100, or recite the alphabet," Dr Mugenyi emphasised.

Right decision?

There is no shortage of supporters of the clarified position of the Education ministry.

Ms Betty Aol, the Gulu City Woman Representative, said she is against automatic promotion. She, however, challenged schools and the Uganda National Examinations Board (Uneb) to check examination malpractices.

"We should drop this policy or automatic promotion because we need to keep up the standards. We also need to address the corrupt tendencies where people steal exams. During our days examination malpractice was unheard of and this is a vice that must be addressed," Ms Aol, who is a teacher by

profession, said.

The head teacher of Nakasero Primary School, Mr Gerald Mijasi, said the removal of automatic promotion is a healthy idea that will improve the quality education.

Ms Rosemary Among, the head teacher of Kuwatule Primary School, noted that her school has always engaged parents of children who fail and advised them to repeat.

65,000

The number of candidates who sat for 2025 PLE and failed to secure placement into Senior One.

Ms Jaliat Yawa, the head teacher of Wandegaya Muslim Primary School, was optimistic that if parents start contributing towards their children's meals the bottleneck of low retention rates will be decisively handled.

"Hunger is a challenge. Most of my learners have dropped out. I only have 45 learners left in the school, but they also complain of headache all the time because of hunger. They also can't concentrate. I will be grateful if all parents pay for their children's meals," she told *Weekend Monitor*.

Hungry mind

On the flip side, Mr Richard Masereje, an educationist, said there is no need for learners to repeat classes unless in extreme circumstances.

"The problem is not about automatic promotion; it's not enough to recruit teachers and pay them well, but what is needed is better teacher management," he said.

Mr Masereje partly attributed poor performance among learners to poor supervision of schools, and a desperately poor school feeding programme that forces learners to study on empty stomachs.

"It is high time for the government to reconsider negotiations with the parents to ensure that they come out with a specific contribution to enable learners to get food at school at a subsidised fee," he advised.

Ms Hamida Khetani, an educationist and Rotary Chatter President of Kolo-lo Summit View, blamed failure rates on limited access to early childhood education (ECD) to enable them get early exposure to education.

Ms Khetani alleged that the government has neglected ECD yet it is the foundation of education in Uganda.

"The government should build more ECD schools, extend teachers' training, and increase the funding to promote performance," she observed.

Ms Kethani went on to note that learners must be empowered with critical thinking skills as early as three years to start building the foundation of their academic journey.

Ms Lydia Namwanje, a primary teacher, said the schools must set standard pass marks in each class to ensure learners put up good scores before being promoted.

She noted that some schools promote learners even after discovering that learners can't progress, calling on teachers for vigilance.

"I think, on average, a learner of lower primary to be promoted to another class must not be lower than 50 in each subject. Why do you promote a learner who has just scored 30 as early as primary one?" Ms Namwanje rhetorically asked.