Namayingo students skip school for gold mining

Education experts are blaming parents for failing to take responsibility and make sacrifices to keep their children in school.

BY ASUMAN MUSOBYA

Namayingo District is experiencing a surge in student absenteeism as many children abandon school to engage in gold mining and smuggling activities along the Kenya border.

The trend has raised concern among teachers, parents and local authorities, who warn that it is undermining learning outcomes and exposing young people to risks such as teenage pregnancy and exploitation.

The deputy head teacher in charge of academics at Banda Secondary School in Banda Sub-county, Ms Viola Nalugwa, told the *Daily Monitor* on Tuesday that boys' academic performance is often undermined by their involvement in smuggling and gold mining to earn money.

Ms Nalugwa blamed parents for failing to take responsibility and make sacrifices to keep their children in school.

"Although the situation is not ideal, students whose parents are making an effort can stay in school, as we allow part payments," she said.



School-going children engage in gold mining in Buyinja Sub-County in Namayingo District at the weekend. The trend has seen absenteeism rise in schools. PHOTO/ASUMAN MUSOBYA

Disrupting new curriculum

She added that irregular attendance has disrupted the implementation of the new curriculum. At her school, which has about 1,000 students, more than 200 are absent each day.

"I want to emphasise that as teachers, we are ready and willing to teach, but students are letting us down. Local leaders and other stakeholders need to come together to find solutions to these challenges," Ms Nalugwa said.

The head teacher of St Philip Secondary School in Buyinja Sub-county, Mr James Kapsawani Myoko, said many students attend classes mainly during examination periods to safeguard their academic records.

"This issue requires intervention from other stakeholders, as we teachers are concerned and are often blamed by our superiors for poor student performance," he said.

Intervention

The District Inspector of Schools, Mr Tomas Maloba, said the Education Department has been holding meetings with parents across the district to encourage them to guide their children and monitor their attendance on their way to school.

"We are pleased that some parents have responded to our call, and as I speak, enrolment has increased, particularly in government-aided schools," he said.

He did not disclose any records supporting the said enrolment.

WHAT THEY SAY...

Blame game. "This issue requires intervention from all stakeholders, teachers are concerned and are often blamed by our superiors..." James Myoko, head teacher of St Philip SS

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Mr Maloba added that local leaders have been engaged to sensitise communities and host monthly radio talk shows to address the problem.

He further revealed that the Education Department has formed a nine-member committee to tackle the matter, including using burial ceremonies as platforms to raise awareness.

The Secretary for Education and Health in Namayingo District, Mr James Ouma, said the issue had been presented before the district council for intervention.

He added that a by-law would soon be passed to regulate mining sites and ensure that children and negligent parents are held accountable.

Teenage pregnancy also remains high in the area, prompting government and non-governmental organisations to intensify efforts to curb both teenage pregnancy and defilement.

Gold business

Stella Ajambo, 55, a resident of Bulamba Village in Buyinja Sub-county, said gold mining has improved her household income, enabling her to build a residential house and a commercial building at Kifuyo Trading Centre.

"As a widow, I use my children to dig and extract gold from the soil. We are happy because we even earn more than a primary school teacher in government schools," she said.

Ms Ajambo urged the government to provide equipment to make gold extraction easier.

Donation

Between 2021 and 2023, the Government of Iceland supported education in Namayingo District with an $8m (Shs29b) donation to fund infrastructure development, teacher training, instructional materials and e-books for 19 primary school teachers.

Namayingo, which shares a border with Kenya and has sub-counties such as Banda and Sigulu Island, relies heavily on smuggling, fishing and gold mining as key sources of livelihood.

Gold extracted from the mining sites at Bulamba and Nakudi is sold locally to Indian traders who have opened shops at the sites.

In addition to mining, some students engage in smuggling goods from Kenya into Uganda, including polythene bags, rice, salt, bar soap, and second-hand clothes.

The district is bordered by Lake Victoria and shares boundaries with Bugiri, Busia and Mayuge districts.

Namayingo has 81 government-aided schools, 129 private schools and 91 early childhood development centres.

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