

Early morning children

BY CAROL NATUKUNDA, CHARLES ETUKURI AND CISSY APIISO

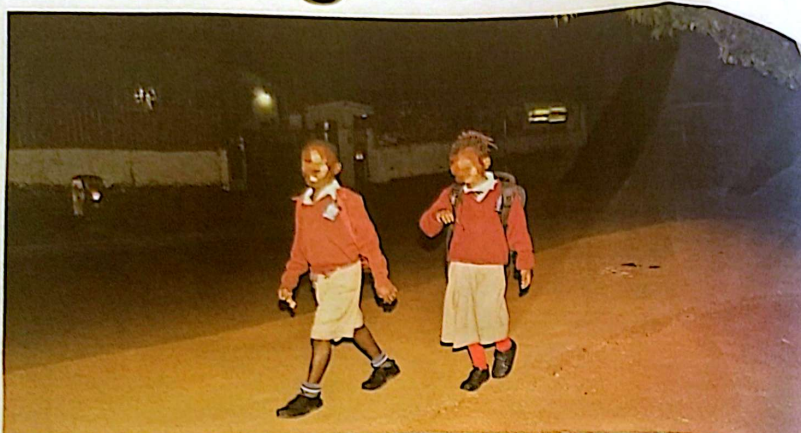
On February 16, 14-year-old Caroline Naituma left her sister's home in Busoga, Wakiso district in the wee hours of the morning. She was given money for her taxi fare to board a vehicle to Mukono district, where she was supposed to join a school for her Senior One. She did not reach her destination.

"That same evening, her parents called her sister, Sylvia Namaku, to inquire about her whereabouts. They had not seen her despite the fact that she had called to tell them she was reporting to school on that fateful day," Luke Owoyesigire, the Kampala Metropolitan Police spokesperson, said. What began as an ordinary disappearance has turned into pain and suffering for the family. Efforts by her family members, the police and friends to trace her whereabouts have yielded no results to date. Her mysterious disappearance continues to haunt the family almost three months later. The family's relentless search among homes of relatives, homes, hospitals and far-flung towns have been in vain.

Similarly, on August 9, 2013, a 14-year-old Eric Okele Okele, a Senior One student at Kyambogo College was kidnapped by unknown men reportedly driving a black government car as he approached the school early in the morning. The students were writing their end of year examinations and Okele wanted to be at school early, so that he could revise. "He was studying with his brother and they usually left home together. They left earlier, at about 5:00am and I did not see them. That day, his elder brother was slightly ahead of him since he had an earlier paper," his father, Patrick Okele, an employee of Mulago Hospital, said. According to eye witnesses, as he approached Wamala Hostel in Kyambogo, a speeding black patero car with red government-registered number plate pulled by the side and some strange men showed him into the car and drove off.

It has been an agonising five year search by the family and friends. They have placed announcements on radio and printed notices with his pictures accompanied by appeal messages and distributed these in schools and churches. All in vain. The family has not given up yet, even though the process has been slow. The parents told *Saturday Vision* that they are hopeful they will one day see their son. "Najuma's case was reported at Naitete Police Division and we are investigating it," Owoyesigire noted.

He also noted that, as the police, it was hard to force parents to accompany their children to school or to the bus park to board vehicles to school. "The responsibility starts with the Ministry of Education, which should clearly set out the reporting time and compel parents to ensure that children do not get out of the compound unaccompanied," Owoyesigire said. His comments come at a time when Makindye Chief Magistrates' Court is hearing a case of a school bus driver in Kampala, who is accused of abusing a four-



Pupils walking to school in the wee hours of the morning. Experts condemn the fact that pupils do not get enough sleep

year-old girl as he was dropping her off back home. Musa Matovu, 44, a driver at Mild Care Parents Primary School in Mubonyo, Kampala is accused of defiling the pupil (names withheld) at 6:00pm on February 15 last year. It is alleged that there was no female school staff on board when the incident happened. The family claims that they only suspected that something was wrong when the girl reportedly screamed in pain while taking a bath. Suspicions were confirmed later on at a medical facility. The case, investigated by the Criminal Investigative Division at Kawe Police Station, is registered under the file number SD REF/07/08/02/2017.

The CID boss at Kawe, Fred Eriku, could not reveal details of the case because the cause was already in court. He, however, confirmed that the driver had been charged with aggravated defilement.

EARLY BIRDS
Saturday Vision investigations show



A pupil walking to school by himself without a parent or guardian

that school children are on the road, unaccompanied by 5:00am. For most upmarket schools in Kampala and Wakiso districts, shuttles pick children from their homes at 4:30am, nearly three hours before sunrise. Community dwellers tell of the shuttles serving as their wake up calls in the wee hours of the morning.

"When my neighbour's child's van

hoots, I know I have about half an hour to catch more some sleep before I wake up," says a proprietor of a restaurant in Mutungo, a Kampala suburb. The drivers of the schools have a routine list showing each child's location before they embark on the journey. "I leave the school at 4:00am and I start with the child who lives

farthest. The earlier the better, because there are many children in different of anonymity. *Saturday Vision* sent out a team of photographers on a random school day. The pictures are unaccompanied through deserted and dark streets. On the streets randomly sampled in Kampala, Wakiso and spotted children in school uniforms moving to school unaccompanied, twos and threes, but our cameras also captured a disturbing image of a lone pupil, perhaps no less than eight years old, walking on the dim Bombo Road in Kampala at about 5:30am.

Another haunting sight is that of a boy and a girl, probably siblings, taxi stage, ready to jump on an evidently empty commuter taxi. On an ordinary hour, this section of the city is crisscrossed with vendors and pickpockets.

The education ministry discussed the issue



Dr Musingy

Higher education minister Dr Chrysostom Musingy says the issue of school hours and school transportation were discussed in a recent multi-sector meeting, which was chaired by the education minister, Janet Museveni.

The meeting, he says, sought to engage stakeholders and line ministries to ensure that the education guidelines are adhered to.

Musingy stated that while the ministry has no control over what time the child wakes up; schools and families must adhere to the 8:00am to 5:00pm opening hours. "Our emphasis is that with or without traffic, children must be brought up in a healthy environment, where they

are safe. They need to have enough sleep. Why should we torture children? Why should we have children on the road at an awkward hour? Musingy says that there are many options. He asks why parents must allow children to be on the road for long hours to school when there are many options. "Parents' school selection decisions influence child travel. The business of bringing children all the way from Mukono to Kampala schools because they think it is the best should be discouraged. There are so many good schools in our communities. The Government has also set up many schools all over the country," Musingy says.

REPORT

kidnapped on way to school

The academic rat race

Whichever reasons the schools give, analysts argue that the early morning school rides and walks are part of the academic rat race, where children are being pushed to secure high grades.

"This is part of the drilling to get aggregate four. It begins in Primary One. The schools begin drumming it into the children's heads that early. So, a child must be at school at dawn, cram as much they can by dusk," Elizabeth Musoke, a scientist at the St. Catherine Youth Entrepreneurship Centre in Wakiso district says.

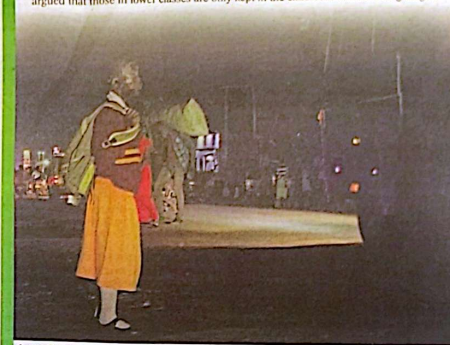
On a normal school day, Marvin, seven, wakes up at 5:00am, despite the fact that he will go to bed at about 10:00pm. That is six hours of sleep, contrary to the medically recommended eight to nine hours of sleep.

PARENTS ARE STRESSED TOO

"My children are always sleeping on their way to and from school. The teachers complain if they do not reach at school in time. They pile them with more homework, which must be signed and supervised. It is crazy," Dr Joshua Mugeru, a father of two, says.

In some of the schools visited, such as Homiddalen, the Primary One pupils were still in class at 4:00pm and Kanya, a parent noted they were forced to keep them in class because of busy parents.

"We have cases of parents who do not have maids at home and prefer to keep the children at school. We also have no option, but keep them in class," Kanya said, but argued that those in lower classes are only kept in the classroom without being taught.



A pupil by herself at the stage, waiting to get into a commuter taxi



Pupils being escorted to board a school van by guardians in the wee hours



An already tired pupil on Ssezibwa Road in Kampala on his way to school

All photos by Roderick Ahimbazwe, Richard Sanya and Kennedy Oryema
Story continues to page 6

Experts speak out

The risks associated to being on the road when it is dark are enormous.

"If they are using the school van, is the matron on board? What happens between the time they leave home and get to class? Can one trust the driver or the taxi they are in? Parents assume that when the child is on the bus, it is the responsibility of the school. But do school owners have a checklist of the people they hire?" CID's Eriku asks.

Besides the risk of being kidnapped or being defiled on their way to school, Dr Sheila Nyanabangyi, the principal medical officer in charge of mental health at the health ministry, says in the long term the children will hate school.

"At about 4:30am, children should be sleeping. School should be a balance of fun and study. That is why some of them, as they grow up, simply become unruly and want to drop out. They will not stand the fatigue and the harassment for too long," Nyanabangyi

says, adding that children should sleep for at least nine hours.

Daniel Nkanda, the commissioner primary and primary education, agrees that children are likely not to perform well since they become stressed and become prone to sickness.

Beatrice Langariti, a psychologist, says early morning walks and rides, coupled with early morning classes, are unnecessary for the children since their brains are still growing and require enough sleep.

"When children do not get enough sleep, they are prone to getting mental issues. They are more likely to become irritable and can get learning challenges," she explains.

Hope Nankunda, a counsellor and team leader at Raising Teenagers Uganda, says: "If a child constantly worries about waking up early, then they are affected. There is no urgency for children in lower classes to be at school by 6:00am because whatever is learnt at that time can be understood at 8:00am."

Fond Memories

CELEBRATING PAMELA KAJERU ABWOOLI NDURU BASHAASHA
24 April 1973 - 21st April 2018

Ten years seems a fleeting time. As the wheels of time turn, who you were and who you touched cannot be erased; we see you very essence in your numerous friends who still reach out to the family, the smiles of your daughters, Gabriella and Wilma and the grace to face another day by your parents James and Gladys Nduru, siblings, Willis and the Bashaasha family and relatives. Of this we are sure and it is an anchor for our souls; that this parting is just a veil that cannot blind the truth that you live. For your faith rested in Him who is the resurrection and the life; and it is the reason that we celebrate you.

May your soul rest in Eternal Peace.