

Before you switch your child's school

New term. Schools across the country today open for the first academic term of 2016. During the long holidays, parents and guardians as well as learners took time to think about switching their children's schools. Shifting to new schools can be a spraining social and emotional experience for students writes **JOSEPH KATO**

In September 2015, residents of Kasa village in Muduma Sub-county, Mpigi District, were left in shock when an 11-year-old boy hanged himself in protest over being transferred to another school.

According to Mr Fred Enanga, the police spokesperson, the victim identified as John Ssegawa took his life using a rope because his parents had changed his school.

"The boy was very angry for being taken to another school against his will. He thus decided to commit suicide by hanging himself on a tree," Mr Enanga said then.

Mr Enanga blamed parents who do not consult their children when making decisions regarding their lives.

"We believe the parents did not seek consent from this boy because they could have known that the child never wanted the school. Or else they took the deceased's wish for granted," he said.

Mr Enanga's argument is complemented by Salha Saleh, a Primary Seven pupil, who says parents should always consult their children before taking them to other schools. Going to another school makes you miss friends and teachers you are used to.

"There was a friend of mine who was taken to another school but I missed her too much. She was also not happy for being switched to another school and her grades have dropped," Salha says.

Why switch schools

Brian Ssenkumbi, a journalist working with one of the television stations in town, says he changed his child's school because he wanted to be in a school close to their new home.



A boda boda cyclist transports a student to school yesterday ahead of the school reopening today. PHOTO BY STEVEN OTAGE

"My child was doing well at her former school but I had to switch her because I had shifted to a new house. Transporting her to and from school regularly was very costly to me," Ssenkumbi says.

Sarah Omunga, a house wife, believes parents switch schools because of increment in schools charges and change of work place.

EFFECTS

Switching schools may increase signs of psychoses, since the student may have to deal with not just a change in environment, but in their social network of friends.

"When a school hikes schools fees, some parents especially those who cannot afford the new charges take children to new schools. Other parents change schools for children when they are transferred," says Omunga.

But Collins Atamba, the head teacher at Queen Ann Primary School, observes that some parents switch children to another school after accumulating heavy debts.

"Among the reasons I have realised that make parents change schools for their children are debts. Some parents are dishonest. They keep giving excuses over school clearances and when the debts amass, they switch schools,"

Atamba says.

However, Jamil Ssendawula, a teacher at Kabojja Junior School, notes that some parents are too curious about children performance. They take no chances once they realise that the school might shape the child as they expect.

"If my child does not perform as I anticipated, then, I have no reason to keep him in such a school. Nowadays, many parents are optimistic about performance in tests, mid-term and end of term exams," Ssendawula says.

Other than performance, some parents may change their children to schools where talent development is paramount. Some schools are in tiny places where they can't play and talent development facilities.

Effects of school change

Nicholas Ngabirano, a counseling psychologist at Uganda Counselors Association (UCA) is curious about the connection between school moves and mental health issue.

Mr Ngabirano says the switch may increase signs of psychoses, since the student may have to deal with not just a change in environment, but in their social network of friends.

"Switching schools may breed psychosis-like symptoms such as visions and interjecting thoughts," he says.

Also Ngabirano says success in

school is often built on strong collaboration between the school administration, teachers and parents. Students who periodically or constantly change schools make it challenging for all parties involved to build strong relationships.

"Teachers may need time to assess a student's abilities to properly place him in reading or work teams. Schools also rely on transfers of educational and personal records to assimilate the student, which can take time, especially with multiple, fast moves," he adds.

Patrick Muinda, the communications officer for Ministry of Education says having to re-integrate into new schools may lead to feelings of exclusion and low self-esteem. That may change the developing sense of self and prime as he would first feel like an outsider.

The negative emotional experiences students go through in trying to adjust to new schools can have bodily concerns as well. Repeated experiences of being defeated in social situations leads to changes in the brain.

"That makes the brain more sensitive to stress. Somewhat about chronic relegation, and chronic barring, is destructive. This is because youngster needs more attention and help to settle into the new atmospheres and make strong social networks," he says,

adding that students may change to a school where his competencies or experiences fall short of, or exceed those of peers.

Within the school year, different teachers and classrooms move at different paces, so a student may come in ahead of, or behind the new school's schedule. Teachers also have different teaching styles and methods.

Ssendawula says peer relationships are important for the confidence and academic success of students at various ages. When a child switches schools, he may leave an environment where he knows most of his peers and has several strong relationships. At the new school, he doesn't know anyone initially and may feel isolated.

Atamba stresses that teachers have to take time away from ordinary schedules and academic routines to integrate new kids into their classrooms.

"While the arriving student has to adjust socially, the other students also have to adjust to the attendance of another character," he says.

Advice to parents

Atamba thinks parents should always seek advice from teachers before they change schools for their children. Going to a new school makes a child look like a stranger to others and it might affect his or her concentration in class. By the time he gets used, he might have already lost the academic pace.

"I would advise parents not to be dictators to their children. Discuss the possible positive and negative effects that could arise from school change," Atamba observes.

Ngabirano who argues with an example of his sister's child, who vanished from her new school, says parents should let child make the decision to either change or not change school.

"My sister disappeared from school the very day he was taken there. It was because the parents thought she was too young to decide. Let children contemplate about the merits and demerits of school change," he stresses.

Muinda reasons that parents should visit and study about the school where they intend to take their children. Learn about the school's performance records, culture transformation, values and sports activities.

"Do not be blindfolded by low charges and forget about the safety of your child. A good school must be in an open place with good and suitable play kits as well parameter walls," Muinda says.