Shs1.5m pocket money row draws govt rebuke

The Ministry of Education and Sports says parents must rethink how much money they give children in school.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

As Senior One and Senior Five students prepare to report for first term, the Ministry of Education and Sports has cautioned parents and guardians against giving learners excessive pocket money, warning that the trend is fostering unrealistic expectations, particularly in boarding schools.

The warning follows a recent case that went viral on social media in which a learner reportedly refused to return to school after being given Shs500,000 as pocket money, arguing that the amount was too little compared to what his peers receive.

Confrontation

In a widely circulated video, the boy said: "It is a fact that my mother does not give me sufficient pocket money for school. Most of my friends come with something like Shs1.5m and I feel it is very small and embarrassing. Last term she gave me Shs400,000 and this time I will be satisfied with Shs1.5m."

The video triggered widespread debate among parents, educators and policymakers about what many describe as a growing culture of extravagant spending among learners, especially in urban boarding schools.

Speaking during the Senior One selection exercise at UMA Grounds in Lugogo, Kampala, on Friday, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education and Sports, Dr Kedrace Turyagyenda, said parents must rethink how much money they give children in school.



A child with her luggage in downtown Kampala on the day when schools re-opened for term one on February 10. PHOTO/GEOFREY MUTUMBA

"We need to guide our parents. For instance, Shs1.5 million can support some children in primary school for up to two years, yet a learner wants it as pocket money in a boarding school where meals and utilities such as water and electricity are already provided," Dr Turyagyenda said.

She noted that in boarding schools, learners' basic needs are largely catered for by institutions.

"This child is in a boarding school where breakfast, lunch and dinner are provided. He is not contributing to electricity or water because the school is already paying. Parents should help children understand that the world is not as simple as it appears when they receive money from parents and guardians," she added.

Dr Turyagyenda urged parents to instill responsible financial habits in their children, saying pocket money should be reasonable and guided by actual need rather than peer pressure.

In a separate interview, educationist Fragil Mandy said while it is difficult to prescribe a standard amount for every learner, parents should carefully assess what their children truly require.

"You cannot dictate an exact figure for every parent, but the amount should be reasonable. Parents must calculate what their children actually need," Mr Mandy said.

"Giving excessive money does not teach financial discipline; instead, it encourages wasteful spending. What does a child need Shs1.5m for at school?" he added.

Concerns over 'promo parties'

At the same time, the ministry has warned school administrators against charging learners extra money for unauthorised programmes and activities, including the increasingly popular "promo parties" for candidate classes.

Promo parties — often organised at the end of the academic cycle for Primary Seven, Senior Four and Senior Six candidates — have in recent years evolved into elaborate events in some schools. They sometimes involve expensive clothing, salon services, photography, entertainment and hired venues, placing additional financial strain on parents.

"I still hear concerns that some of you are asking learners to pay extra money for certain programmes. I have all names, but I hear many such reports. I also hear that candidate classes are being encouraged to buy special outfits and spend money on salon services for these activities," Dr Turyagyenda said.

"I am not impressed by that. I therefore appeal to you to resist pressure from these young people. You are expected to guide them and help them understand that there is a time for everything," she added.

The ministry also cautioned head teachers against allowing unauthorised organisations to introduce programmes or materials in schools without clearance.

"Ensure that no unauthorised or inappropriate programmes or materials are accepted in your school, some of which are brought in by non-governmental organisations and other actors. Please be careful," she said.

The ministry further urged schools to strengthen engagement with parents and communities, promote meaningful parental participation in learners' education, and maintain safe, learner-friendly environments supported by effective guidance and counselling services.

WHY GOVT CONCERN

Education officials say excessive pocket money in boarding schools:

- Fuels peer pressure and unhealthy competition.
- Encourages wasteful spending habits.
- Undermines financial discipline among learners.
- Creates inequality between students.
- Distracts learners from academics.

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