Ongoing selection process at UMA Show Grounds in Lugogo. PHOTO/GEOFREY MUTUMBA

Senior One placement anxiet

As thousands of families celebrate Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) results, many are quietly grappling with a far more difficult question where, and whether, their children will continue with secondary education.

BY BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA

For many Ugandan families, the release of Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) results marks the end of one struggle and the beginning of another.

The joy that follows good grades is often short-lived, quickly replaced by fear, confusion and financial panic as parents confront the reality of Senior One placement.

PLE results are expected to bring relief and celebration. In many communities, neighbours gather to congratulate successful candidates, phones buzz with messages, and proud parents announce aggregates with a mixture of disbelief and joy.

But for a growing number of households, that happiness fades quickly. Within days, sometimes even hours, celebration gives way to anxiety as families begin the difficult search for secondary schools, school fees and clarity about what comes next.

The transition from Primary Seven to Senior One is one of the most decisive and stressful moments in a child's education journey.

Yet it receives far less attention than performance rankings and lists of top schools, even though it often determines whether a child proceeds smoothly to secondary education, joins late, or drops out altogether.

The placement process

After results are released, many parents expect a clear and predictable path to secondary school. Instead, they encounter a placement process that feels complex and intimidating, particularly for families experiencing it for the first time.

In theory, learners are placed according to their performance and the choices made during the PLE registration process. In practice, the system is shaped by limited school capacity, varying cut-off points and affordability.

As demand for places in government-aided secondary schools continues to grow, competition becomes intense, leaving many families unprepared for the outcome.

Urban parents, particularly those with access to internet-enabled phones, social networks and physical proximity to schools, are often able to follow placement lists closely and act quickly. In rural areas, information spreads slowly, largely through word of mouth, leaving families uncertain about deadlines, vacancies and requirements.

By the time some parents fully understand what is required, places in preferred schools have already been taken. This information gap has become one of the quiet drivers of inequality in access to secondary education.

When a good result is not enough

One of the most painful realities for many families is discovering that a good PLE result does not automatically guarantee placement in a quality secondary school.

Rehema Kisitu Lutalo, the head teacher of Mariam High School, a government-aided USE school, says demand for Senior One places consistently exceeds supply. She explains that the school has about 250 vacancies for Senior One students each year and admits learners from the best grades up to aggregate 28 under the USE programme. For these students, the government provides a capitation grant and covers UNEB registration fees.

Learners who obtain aggregates 29 and 30 may also be admitted to government-aided schools, but only as private students. In such cases, the government does not provide capitation grants or pay examination registration fees, leaving parents to cover the full cost.

"In many cases, the demand exceeds our capacity, but we go an extra mile and enroll as many students as possible," Lutalo says. "Quality education is not only about four-walled infrastructure. We can improvise, even using temporary spaces, and address challenges as they come."

Despite such efforts, limited infrastructure and staffing mean schools cannot absorb all qualified learners. As a result, some pupils who perform well are placed in schools far from their homes or in institutions they had not planned for. Others are advised to seek private schools.

KEY ADVICE

Before accepting a placement, parents should confirm whether their child has been admitted as a USE or private student, as this determines the long-term cost of education. In theory, learners are placed according to their performance and the choices made during the PLE registration process. In practice, the system is shaped by limited school capacity, varying cut-off points and affordability.



Parents celebrate with their child. PHOTO/FILE