

NEW TIGHT REQUIREMENTS FOR SCHOOLS

By Martin Kitubi

For many schools, having muscles and energy would qualify one to become a school cook.

While preparing food is partly chemistry, which requires measuring ingredients, many cooks are not required to have academic papers, let alone medical check-ups.

However, with effect from this term, all school cooks must have at least completed Primary Seven and be subject to medical check-ups twice a year.

All school vehicles that transport learners must be labelled with the school's name, while passengers' vehicles, such as SUVs and sedans, should seek clearance for roadworthiness from relevant authorities to carry children.

In addition, schools are now required to provide either a radio or a television set for the staff room.

Under the new climate and environment management requirements, schools are required to use energy-saving stoves, deploy alternative sources of fuel to firewood for cooking and adopt careful use of electricity.

The new requirements are part of the new Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards (BRMS) for national schools, covering primary and secondary schools that have been unveiled.

Under the changes, the education ministry has expanded the standard indicators from 13 to 17 under the new BRMS.

While the ministry has tightened all the standards, the ones that have been incorporated include road safety, food safety and security, management of information communication technology, and climate and environment management.

The new BRMS were presented last week for the first time before inspectors of schools during a sensitisation workshop held at Teso College Aloit in Soroti city.

The three-day workshop was attended by inspectors of schools from West Nile, Acholi, Lango, Karamoja and Teso sub-regions.

FOOD SAFETY AND SECURITY

On food safety, the ministry now demands that the schools ensure that all food is procured from safe sources.

On top of that, all the processed food and drinks in

schools must be certified by Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS).

The schools are now required to have a proper food storage facility, with a designated place for food separate from other stores placed on pallets or raised platforms.

Food storage facilities must be built in a protective design that prevents access and damage from rodents and schools should avoid trapping rodents using poison in the food store.

The storage facilities must have appropriate ventilation, with fresh and dry food kept on separate racks and shelves.

For every food item that goes to the store, it must be documented with a fully-fledged stock register indicating the quantities received and the source.

GOVT ON THE MOVE

Dr Kedraac Turyagyeenda, the ministry's permanent secretary, noted that the sector is undergoing reforms to ensure that learners not only access quality education, but also remain safe.

Having served at the ministry's Directorate of Education Standards (DES), which is the inspection arm of the ministry, Turyagyeenda explained that inspectors must ensure that the Government policies are implemented to the letter. Inspectors are the quality assurance monitors and we want to empower them to do their work. The ministry envisages an education system which is not just about distinctions and awards, but holistic education," she said.

Frances Atima, the chief inspector of schools at the ministry, noted that the new BRMS have come to address emerging issues, both local and international.

"We have complaints about children waking up at 3:00am to be picked up for school. Some children are dropped off by school vans as late as 9:00pm. You have also seen cases of food poisoning in schools, which are associated with poor food storage. We want to curb all these vices," she said.

Atima noted that the new BRMS have been signed by the authority and they are currently undergoing printing for distribution.

Edward Muwanguzi Zirayide, who participated in the formation of the BRMS, explained that the expansion of schooling, combined with increasing traffic density



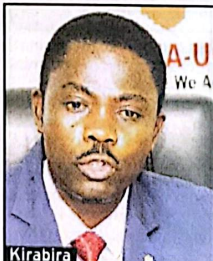
One of the cooks at Kolo SS trying to light fire using firewood which is highly depleting trees in Uganda



Turyagyeenda



Atima



Kirabira

around urban, peri-urban, and growing trading centres, has made the physical transit of

ROAD SAFETY

As part of the road safety requirements, children who walk to school are required to be accompanied by a trusted caregiver. For schools that use drivers, on top of having a driving permit class for the particular vehicle, a school van must have a designated staff with a letter of assignment indicating clear roles and responsibilities to accompany learners to and from school. Both the driver and the transport assistant shall be in uniform and always display their identification badges.

While on board the school van, the new standards demand that learners should not be exposed to any verbal, audio-visual, print media materials that are not related to learning.

In addition, if the school van is licensed to carry 14 passengers, the vehicle will be required to adhere to the recommended vehicle capacity and that each school must have a policy on transportation of learners. Relatedly, parents are now required to provide written consent for the learners to be transported by the schools. While school vans have been picking up children early in the morning and often drop them late at home, the new BRMS demands that the learners be transported during daytime between 6:00am to 6:00pm.

learners a critical institutional responsibility.

Incorporating road safety into the BRMS, he said, benchmarks ensure that schools actively implement protective measures—such as designated safe drop-off zones, learner transport regulations, and pedestrian safety orientation.

"By making this an inspectable standard, the ministry compels school managers to look beyond the school gate and mitigate the high risk of traffic-related injuries, thereby safeguarding

the lives of commuting learners," he said.

Muwanguzi also noted that learners' nutritional status directly dictates their cognitive capacity and classroom retention and that the inclusion of food safety and security shifts institutional feeding from a basic administrative routine to a regulated standard of learner welfare.

This indicator demands that schools guarantee clean food preparation environments, hygienic storage facilities to prevent contamination, and reliable, nutritionally adequate

meal planning.

"Enforcing these standards directly combats malnutrition and foodborne illnesses, minimising school absenteeism and maximising foundational learning outcomes," Muwanguzi said.

SCHOOL MANAGERS SPEAK OUT

While some school managers support the ideas, they challenged some provisions.

Hasadu Kirabira, the national chairperson of the National Private Education Institutions Association (NPEIA), supports the idea of having schools' vans that are roadworthy and licensed to do the job.

In addition, he supports the idea of the drivers and transport assistants having uniforms for easy identification, adding that, "Some schools are already doing it. That we can do it."

However, on the requirement to set up a television or radio set for the staffroom, Kirabira warned that it is likely to distract the teacher's attention.

While schools support the climate change measures, making energy-saving stoves mandatory for all schools, he said, will be hard to implement.

These energy-saving stoves are expensive. Just a handful of the schools in Uganda can buy them. You are asking a school to spend sh10m and above to build an energy-saving stove when the school needs more textbooks, which will be hard.

"We have asked the Government many times to subsidise electricity and gas for cooking at schools. Once the cost of these two goes down, I assure you many schools will abandon firewood within a year," he said.

However, a headteacher of a government primary school in eastern Uganda, who spoke on grounds of anonymity, warned against implementing the requirement for energy-saving stoves and food stores.

"I will tell you, many government schools are struggling to set up decent pit latrines. Many teachers share latrines with students and you want them to build millions worth of energy-saving stoves? Where will this money come from?" the headteacher wondered.

"Even the requirement to have a separate room as a food store will be hard for us. We are having pressure on the classroom because of the increasing number of learners and you expect us to have a special room for food?" he wondered.