

Parents' reluctance school FEEDING RETARDS Policy

First Lady and education minister Janet Museveni is traversing the country mobilising parents and communities on the importance of school feeding. In the second story in a series on school feeding, **Prisca Baike** and **Andrew Masinde** analyse why the school feeding policy has not been successful in schools

Both the Education Act and the Universal Primary Education (UPE) implementation guidelines are clear: feeding of children in schools is a responsibility of the parents.

However, a visit to many primary schools, especially in the countryside reveals the opposite.

It is lunchtime at Kiwanga UMEA Primary School in Mukono. While a few students stroll to the kiosks in the neighbourhood to buy snacks, the majority of them spend the hour, almost in oblivion of the fact that it is mealtime.

While research and nutritionists have underscored the importance of breakfast and midday meal on improving academic achievements and the child's physical development, it is ironic that parents seems to have reneged on their responsibility to feed children. Studies show that children who have breakfast and lunch are more alert in class, perform better and are active in co-curricular activities.

Why the policy has failed

Dr Daniel Nkaada, the commissioner basic education, points to the negative attitude of parents to provide meals for their children to laziness where parents are neglecting their responsibilities towards their children.

"People expect the Government to provide for them everything," Nkaada says.

Poor communication of the issue, according to Nkaada is what has held the

THE MISS X

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policy back. He says that the issue was communicated centrally and may not have reached all parts of the country.

"That is why the honorable minister is going around the country to explain to every region what school feeding means and how it can be effected," Nkaada says.

Nkaada maintains that it is the duty of a parent to feed their child. He maintains that the Government has provided education and the least parents can do is to feed their own children.

Dr Yusuf Nsubuga, the former director for basic and secondary education, says the school feeding policy has failed to kick off due to the poor initial communication. "There was some contradiction in the programme," Nsubuga says. "When the Government said education was free, parents thought it catered for everything, including feeding."

Nsubuga also blames this attitude on the *laissez faire* culture which encourages irresponsibility among individuals.



Pupils lining up for food. Parents need to contribute to their children's meals at school

Fagil Mandy, an education consultant, says the problem with parents in Uganda is that many have become irresponsible. They think giving birth to children is for fun, forgetting that this comes with a lot of responsibility.

Mandy notes that education is one responsibility parents have abandoned, leaving everything to the Government, which is wrong.

"Even though the Government offers free education, at least as a parent they should also have something they offer to their children because at the end of the day it is the parent who will take the pride," Mandy notes.

"If as an adult you eat breakfast, lunch and even want to eat supper, what about children? How do they expect a child to stay at school all day without something in the stomach, such parents should be treated with no mercy," he adds.

Wilber Naika, a former teacher and also a headteacher at Nahirumba Primary School in Kamuli, says initially parents used to send maize and beans to school to feed their children. He says this was because the parents could not prepare food for the children early in the morning as they had to go for work.

Naika notes that when some politicians moved around the country during election campaigns telling parents that the Government will provide every thing for their children at school, parents stopped

providing the maize and beans they were sending to schools.

"Imagine some parents began coming to our office demanding for the balance of food that the Government provides.

Politicians showed top fooling parents when they told them for their political benefits," says Naika. He adds that the resident district commissioners (RDCs) also started

moving around schools arresting headteachers who were forcing parents to send food for feeding children at schools. This affected the whole process. "The RDCs were telling parents that



Pupils of St Jude Primary School Naguru getting food

the Government provided everything so schools should not ask parents for anything when it comes to education. I believe this is a wrong move that needs to be reversed," Naika says.

What needs to be done
Mandy says it is high time the Government cracked the whip and stopped begging parents to do their responsibility.

"They should be handled with an iron hand because they (the Government) have proved that taking softly can't work," says Mandy.

Lusambu says politicians should desist from telling parents that the Government provides everything at school. They are supposed to encourage parents to provide for their children.

"They should not use politics to misguide parents; they have made parents stop playing their roles with hope that the Government is responsible for everything. Education is for both parents and the government. It is not one-sided. If the Government is paying fees why can't the parents feed their children and even buy scholastic materials?" he adds.

Lusambu warns politicians who move around telling parents that the Government provided everything at school; he says the politicians are sending a wrong message, yet they are supposed to encourage parents to provide for their children.

EFFECTS OF HUNGER

- Lowers child's concentration
- Affects attention and lowers retention rate
- Hampers learning and affects cognitive abilities
- Affects physiological growth
- Impacts the child's social skills

Parents' dilemma

Assad Bukone whose children attend different schools under the UPE programme in Mbale district says schools demand a lot money for meals, with some schools charging up to sh60,000.

"These schools are after making profits and not providing meals for our children," says the father of five. He explains that it is in his best interest for his children to have meals at school although he maintains that schools should not set the meal prices so high.

Moses Okeng, the headteacher, Lela Opuk Modern Primary School in Lira says many parents are reluctant to contribute towards their children's feeding.

"I had a meeting with them two years ago but they said they could not afford it," Okeng says. He also notes that having a meal while at school would help improve learning outcomes.

"Most of the afternoon classes and other school programmes are affected because you cannot teach children who have not eaten," Okeng says. The parents' unwillingness aside, Okeng also notes that the lack of facilities makes it hard for schools to implement the



Hill Preparatory School pupils working in the school garden. Such projects can provide healthy foods for the pupils

WAY FORWARD

Aggrey Kibenge, the education ministry under secretary, says parents play a central role in feeding their children.

He explains that the working group will focus its work on realistic methods of providing food for school children such as home-grown school feeding, promoting the consumption of fortified foods in schools and formulating school feeding programmes that promote healthy diets to stop malnutrition.

As stipulated in the school feeding guidelines, parents have three options of providing meals for their children. These are: paying money to the school administration to buy food for pupils, packing food for their children or directly providing food items such as maize and beans to the school administration.

The guidelines states that districts shall pass by-laws providing suitable penalties to parents who default in contributing to school feeding.



Packing lunch is one of the options

feeding programme.

"We do not have offices and storage rooms so even if the parents were to collect food, we would not have where to keep it," Okeng says.

Ray of hope

Aisha Nabbagala, a parent of two school-going children, says it is easier for parents to contribute money as this enables the school to plan better for their meals.

Last term, Nabbagala contributed sh30,000 per child for lunch.

"At first I resisted thinking I was being fleeced, but it is paying off," says Nabbagala who intends to continue paying for her children's meals come next term.

"I don't want them to study while hungry. They understand better after they have eaten something," Nabbagala says.

Francis Khaukha, the headteacher of Nawuyo Primary School in Mbale, explains how challenging it has been to get parents on board as far as school feeding is concerned.

Khaukha says most of the parents were averse to the idea of contributing money but they later understood that without meals, children cannot concentrate especially in the afternoon.

From only feeding 30 pupils last year, Khaukha says the number had tripled by

the close of last term. He hopes that the number will increase next term.

"It was not easy in the beginning but through sensitisation, they started contributing the money," says Khaukha.

Nawuyo, like all public primary schools received a letter from the Office of the Prime Minister to reinforce the school feeding policy in schools.

Khaukha is hopeful that this kind of reinforcement will go a long way in holding parents accountable to their responsibility of feeding their children.

According to Khaukha, majority of the parents in his school, having heard of the communication, have pledged to contribute for their children's feeding next term.

Every child is charged sh60,000 for meals per term.

"A term has 60 days and that implies that every meal is valued at sh1000," Khaukha says.

Through sensitisation, Khaukha says that parents have been encouraged, one at a time to pay for their children's meals. He advises other headteachers to exercise patience and sensitive parents if the programme is to take off.

Khaukha also encourages school leaders to ensure that they provide quality meals to the pupils as a way of encouraging parents to contribute.

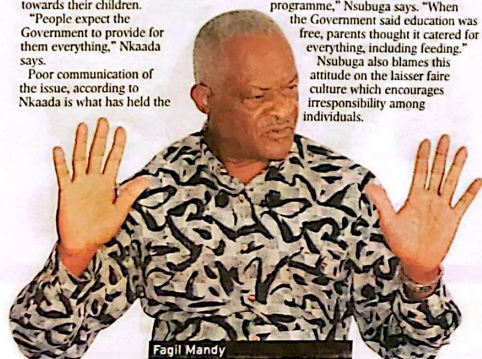
"If the food provided is of poor quality, then other parents will not find the need to pay," Khaukha warns.

He advises that even if it is Posho and beans served every day, it should be well-prepared to ensure it is safety for the children's consumption.

Although education in public schools is free, experts maintain that it is the duty of the parent to provide meals for their children as a way of ensuring proper learning and good performance.

TOP TIP ✓

Although the Government offers free education, at least as a parent they should also have something they offer to their children because at the end of the day it is the parent who will take the pride.



Fagil Mandy