and families to adopt practical ways of managing stress during this period. Families should al-

formance, conflict and emotional dis...
Best of luck with the second term.

Nutritionists tip schools on healthy food routines



Students work in a vegetable garden at school last year. PHOTO/FILE

DIETARY DIVERSITY

Alternatives.
Schools are encouraged to enrich maize porridge with milk or soya to improve nutrient intake among learners.

BY SYLIVIA KATUSHABE

KAMPALA. As schools across Uganda continue to rely heavily on beans and posho as a major part of their menu for learners, throughout the school term, nutrition experts are calling for a shift in mindset. They say schools should improve feeding without increasing school fees.

In many schools, learners spend an entire term eating the same meals daily, with only a few institutions occasionally providing what they call "special meals" such as rice, meat, groundnut sauce or milk during public holidays or visitation days.

However, nutritionists say improving school feeding is not necessarily about expensive meals, but rather proper planning, dietary diversity and maximizing locally available foods.

According to Bernard Bwambale, a nutritionist, the long-standing belief that beans and posho are the most affordable feeding option for schools is misguided.

He insists that while the meal provides energy and proteins to growing teens, relying on them throughout the term, creates what he termed as a "mono diet," where learners repeatedly eat the same food for months. "Some of these children may end up with micronutrient deficiencies," he said.

Mr Daniel Kamara, a nutritionist at Bwindi Community Hospital, agreed and warned that feeding learners on the same meal throughout the term may limit dietary diversity, appetite, concentration, and nutrient intake.

"Schools do not need expensive foods daily. Small additions can greatly improve nutrition: Add green leafy vegetables like dodo, nakati, spinach, or cabbage at least 2–3 times weekly," Mr Kamara said.

Mr Bwambale also dismissed the argument that improving school meals would automatically translate into increased tuition fees, saying there are many affordable alternatives that fit within the same budget.

"There are options that can be available even at the same cost," he added. He cited eggs, sweet potatoes, bananas, vegetables and fruits as examples of affordable foods, that schools can gradually introduce into learners' meals.

"If you compare the cost of a sack of posho and a sack of sweet potatoes, you will realize that children can actually get satisfied quickly on potatoes," he explained.

Mr Bwambale also urged schools to stop viewing fruits as expensive luxuries, arguing that locally available fruits such as watermelon, pineapples and yellow bananas can feed many learners at low cost.

He insisted that the fear was based on the fact schools had not done a cost-benefit analysis, instead urging them to consult nutritionists to design for them cost effective menus.

"Nutritionists are out there who can come and support these schools in developing menus. You don't need to increase tuition, you just need to work within the available means to provide an alternative for whatever you are giving within the same cost," Mr Bwambale said.

He added; "A learner's plate should have diversity [ideally]. You need carbohydrates from foods like sweet potatoes, matooke, cassava, rice or posho, proteins such as beans, soya or eggs, and vegetables and fruits."

Mr Bwambale encouraged schools to enrich maize porridge with milk or soya to improve nutrient intake among learners.

He warned that poor nutrition contributes to poor academic performance, weak immunity and increased illness among learners.

"Children who are not well-fed in school forget about their performance. They won't perform well. They fall sick easily and you are spending more money on medicines," Mr Bwambale said.

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How schools can close gaps in feeding

STORY ONTINUED FROM PAGE

Dr Robert Fungo, a researcher in nutrition and food technology at the Department of Food Technology and Nutrition at Makerere University, explained that posho (maize meal/ugali) and beans alone cannot provide enough balanced nutrition, especially for the growing Ugandan school learners including children and adolescents.

"Posho and beans provide a basic combination of energy and protein, but fall short in several key areas, ... Growing children need more nutrients because hunger or poor nutrition affects attendance, focus, and performance by the learners," Dr Fungo said.

In addition, Mr Bwambale also urged schools to establish vegetable gardens and small-scale farming projects to support feeding programmes and teach learners practical agricultural skills.

"It should even be mandatory that all schools have gardens where they produce vegetables," he said, adding that school should engage in farming using the available spaces in their institutions.

Mr Bwambale explains that compound gardening can help schools plant vegetables like cabbage, dodo, eggplants, sukuma wiki, spinach at little or no cost while also helping learners understand food production and nutrition.

He added that it should be made mandatory that all schools have a piece of land where they are producing vegetables.

"Ideally, if I were to develop a programme for vegetable production in schools, I would make it per class so that each class has their own garden, and they start competing to produce food," Bwambale said.

He emphasized that schools with large pieces of land should also consider poultry keeping, dairy farming and fruit growing to supplement feeding programmes.

Dr Fungo adds that there are better low cost ways schools to prepare posho and beans to improve nutrition by preparing biofortified food varieties, use vitamin - A maize (orange maize) for posho/porridge, which naturally boosts vitamin - A for immunity, vision, and growth without changing taste or preparation much.

"Fry onions, tomatoes, and vegetables with beans, and or steam/mix greens into the dish. Also use school gardens to grow tomatoes, cabbage, kale and make this cheap and educational to learners. These will add vitamins (A, C), minerals, fiber, and antioxidants. Vitamin C from vegetable improves iron absorption from beans," Dr Fungo said.

Another way is to use iron-rich beans (high-iron and zinc varieties) which help combat anemia, common in school children. Many schools now grow these crops in school gardens or source them locally, improving nutrition while supporting farmers.

He also emphasized, incorporating affordable local vegetables like cabbage, kale (sukuma wiki), spinach, nakati, dodo, tomatoes, or pumpkin leaves into the bean sauce or as a side.

Devis Amanya, another nutritionist also suggests occasionally replacing posho with locally available staple foods like sweet potatoes, cassava, Irish potatoes or matooke depending on the region where the school is located, as it can be sourced at a cheaper price.

"School feeding should not only fight hunger, but also support learning, growth, immunity, and future health. Affordable dietary diversity is possible when schools maximize local foods wisely," he said.

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