PLE: Absenteeism, lack of meals causing failure

Analysts say performance often mirrors socio-economic conditions and school support rather than learners' ability alone.

BY PHOEBE MASONGOLE & JOSEPH OMOLLO

The release of the 2025 Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) results in Bugisu Sub-region and Tororo districts have revealed a mixed bag of triumphs and challenges.

While some schools celebrated an increment in Division One pupils, others struggled, highlighting the persistent gaps in resources, supervision, and community support.

From urban centres like Mbale City to the more remote districts of Sironko, Manafwa, Bududa, Namisindwa, and Bulambuli, officials describe the performance as encouraging but uneven.

Analysts noted that performance often mirrors socio-economic conditions and school support rather than ability alone.

Mbale City emerged among the better-performing areas in Eastern Uganda. Mr John Waluku, the Mbale City inspector of schools, reported that more than 7,000 candidates sat for the PLE last year. Of these, 782 pupils attained Division One, with girls slightly outnumbering boys.

According to his analysis, the majority of pupils attained Division Two and Division Three, while 875 were in Division Four, 945 were ungraded, and 66 did not sit the exam.

"Generally speaking, Mbale City performed well compared to many districts," Mr Waluku said.

He added: "The results show progress compared to previous years, although challenges remain, especially in government schools, where disruptions affected learning."

Top-performing public schools in the city with candidates with Division One included Nabuyonga Primary School (15), Namakwekwe Primary School (13), Yoweri Seven Primary School (6), Fayawa Primary School (17), Naoyo Primary School (8), North Road Primary School (13), Wanyera Police Primary School (15), and Sergeant Vancouver Primary School (15).

Outside Mbale City, PLE performance varied across Bugisu districts. In Mbale District, the number of candidates who got Division One increased slightly compared to 2024, but large class sizes and limited textbooks continued to cause challenges.

Mr Stephen Wasaki, the head teacher of Musoto Primary School, said the big pupil population was a huge challenge.

"We worked hard to give learners extra lessons after school, but large classes and insufficient books made it difficult to prepare every pupil fully."

In Sironko District, distance to school and irregular attendance affected results.

Ms Grace Akello, the head teacher of Hope Primary School, said: "Some children walk more than five kilometers to reach school. Even when they arrive, fatigue and lateness reduce the time they can focus on lessons."

Schools in Manafwa District cited challenges such as poverty and child labour.

"Many pupils help their families in the fields. While we try to offer catch-up classes, it is challenging to cover the syllabus fully before exams," Mr Moses Nkunda, the director of Victory Primary School, said.

In Bududa and Bulambuli districts, rough terrain and seasonal disruptions reduced attendance.

Mr Joel Wataka, the head teacher of Bubita Primary in Bududa, explained: "During the rainy season, roads and footpaths, bridges become impassable. Some children miss weeks of lessons, which affects their performance."

Mr Joel Masayi, the head teacher of Sunrise Primary in Namisindwa District, said there is a need for parental involvement in order to improve learning outcomes.

"We held meetings with families every term to encourage attendance and provide learning materials. That support has helped our pupils to perform better than last year," he said.

A notable pattern across Bugisu was the performance gap between private and government-aided schools.

Private schools generally recorded higher numbers of candidates with Division One and Two. This performance was attributed to smaller classes, uninterrupted teaching, and stronger parental involvement.

Ms Aisha Nabulo, the Sironko District Woman MP-elect, said candidates and teachers should reside within the school if performance is to improve.

"Our children are walking long distances to reach school, and many are missing classes. We must support our teachers and schools to ensure every child can learn effectively," she said.

Compared to 2024, Bugisu saw small improvements in Division One passes, particularly in urban schools. However, rural districts and government-aided schools continue to lag behind.

In Tororo District, more than 1,000 pupils out of 8,651 who registered for the 2025 PLE in the district did not qualify to enrol for secondary education.

Mr Denis Francis Tabu, the Tororo District inspector of schools, said out of 8,651 candidates who registered in the district, 451 candidates passed in Grade One, 3,375 candidates got Grade Two, 2,386 passed in Grade Three, and 1,299 candidates got Grade Four.

Mr Tabu, however, said more candidates passed in Division One in 2025 than in 2024, having an increase of 42 candidates.

He attributed the poor performance to failure by parents to support feeding of their children at school, forcing pupils to study on empty stomachs.

"The analysis shows that private schools out performed government-aided primary schools in the district because the former provide meals," he said.

Mr John Okea, the district LC5 chairperson, said the performance is still wanting even though there was some improvement last year.

"I am happy that the graph has been ascending, meaning that we just need to fix a few things and we shall be at the helm," he said.

Mr Okea said education is one of the sectors that his leadership is going to give much attention, adding that having more than 1,000 learners not qualifying to enrol for secondary education is "abnormal."

Some of the educationists in the district said a proposal by the government to have teachers teaching in government schools have their children also study in the same schools will improve academic performance.



Pupils of Kayunga Girl's Primary School lineup for lunch on September 19,2025. Education experts say learners in schools that do not provide meals often perform poorly because they either skip lessons,especially in the afternoon, or fail to focus on empty stomaches. PHOTO/ FRED MUZAALE

MEALS IN SCHOOLS

Mr Sam Wambaka, an educationist, urged stakeholders to ensure children get meals at school, so that they don't skip lessons or eventually drop out.

"There is no way a hungry child can perform well. The mind coordinates with a healthy body if a child has not eaten, he won't understand what the teacher is teaching," he said.

Mr Wambaka added: "The government should make attempts to see children eat while at school, because this same issue exposes them to theft, bad people who sexually abuse them after buying small eatables for them."

BY ASUMAN MUSOBYA

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