

Parents brace for high fees as schools open



A student waits to board a taxi to school. Many schools have increased fees due to the high cost of living.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KAKUMIRI

Cost of education. Some parents fault schools of unnecessarily increasing school fees but others have decided to reduce their cost of living to ensure their children go back to school.

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COUNTRYWIDE. Mr John Baptist Balagadde, a trader in Masaka Town, has four school-going children and one of them is a Senior One entrant.

As the reporting date nears, Mr Balagadde dreads what lies ahead as he has to feed the family and look for school fees. He needs Shs4 million for the first term.

"I could have sold my bananas or coffee to pay fees for my children, but I recorded poor harvests due to dry spells. This business can only fetch me less than Shs500,000 as profit in a month," he says. One of his children joining Senior One wants to join Kibuli SS and they need at least Shs1.6 million for fees and requirements.

But Mr Balagadde is just a reflection of the dilemma many parents across the country are faced with. Ms Dorothy Nalule, a mother of three, of which two are in upper primary and one is in Senior Two, says all schools that her children attend have raised fees. She cites Masaka SS which is charging Shs600,000, up from Shs580,000 last year.

"By all means, we will have to send our children back to school even if it needs securing loans so that we pay back later, but also the bank rates are very high," she says.

"Some schools, especially primary ones ask for juice or milk cartons but when you ask the children, they tell you they are not given such things while at school. You now wonder where such items are taken," Ms Nalule says. Ms Nalule may be lucky to take her children back to school.

But for Ms Margaret Tebatenda, 40, a resident of Nyendo, a Masaka suburb, her story is different. She says her son, who is supposed to join Senior One, may have to suspend school as she looks for money.

"My husband died in an accident last year and I struggled to have my boy sit exams. The only option left for him is to look for employment in motor garages nearby," she says.

In Mbale District, a section of parents interviewed, described the set

school fees as unrealistic.

Ms Hadijah Namasaba, a mobile money agent on Republic Street, says she has struggled to find a better school with affordable fees for her son who scored Aggregate 13 in Primary Leaving Examinations in vain.

"I went to one of the good schools; the school bursar told me they have increased fees for Senior One students from Shs295,000 to Shs350,000. I gave up. I am now looking for another school," she says.

Another parent, Mr Adam Werrikhe, says apart from hiked fees, they are also not satisfied with unexplained school requirements.

"These things are designed by schools to fleece us. Our children tell us that many of the items schools request for, are not even used at school, where do they go?" he asks.

A parent who plans to take his child to Mbale Progressive High School will part with Shs550,000 for boarding section and Shs200,000 for day without other school requirements.

"Who doesn't see that the cost of everything has risen? We run several programmes that require money such as computer laboratory and school vans. Water and electricity tariffs have all gone up," MUSA SSENKONGA, HEAD TEACHER OF HAMDAN GIRLS, MBALE

Solomon Mafabi, a parent, says he has reduced his budget and also foregone other household needs to be able to take his five children to school this term.

However, some head teachers say fees structures are dictated by the prevailing cost of living. "The fees structures we set and other charges are very realistic. We first consider the parents capabilities, but only that the current cost of items, may force us to increase," Mr Paul Munyelo, head teacher, Mbale Progressive, says.

Mr Musa Ssenyonga, the head teacher of Hamdan Girls, says the government should consider giving private schools books and science equipment to reduce the costs because they complement their role of educating the nation.

However, Mr Christopher Mulindwa, a parent in Mpigi District, says whereas the fees increment will have financial implication on many parents, it is justifiable for

able schools run their programmes smoothly.

"The problem would be if there was no consultation, but as long as parents consented to the increment for instance in their PTA meetings, then it is fine. Imagine a boarding school where a student has to be fed, given medical care and other necessities. As a school, you cannot operate without increasing fees when faced with this skyrocketing cost of living," Mr Mulindwa says.

But Muhammad Sserugo, the head teacher of Kinaawa High School -Kawempe campus, says much as they are faced with high operational costs and unstable food prices, their fees structure remained the same as last year for all classes.

"We are parents too and know the situation in the country. What we have done is minimise our expenditure so that we can still offer a service to our people," he says.

Mr Robert Ojok, the head teacher of St Joseph's College, Layibi, says whatever increment they made was through consultation with the parents.

Kibubura Girls SS head teacher Stephen Mutambi says they have not increased school fees and have maintained Shs690,000 which they charged Senior One entrants last year.

"We wanted to increase fees, but many parents complained that they are poor and have many to children to take care of," he says.

Sister Gladys Kachope, the head teacher of Immaculate Heart Girls, Nyakibale SS, says they may increase fees from the current Shs750,000 they charge Senior One students if food prices remain high.

Last week, the ministry of Education said schools can increase fees, but after seeking clearance and the increment must be reasonable.

A total of 445,546 students are expected to join Senior One and others vocational and technical schools. Senior One entrants are expected to report on February 13.

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