

**Dr Nelson Musoba, medical practitioner**

# End stigma in schools

**N**ow that schools have resumed their academic term, I have been reflecting on the core role of academic institutions in achieving our set targets of ending AIDS by 2030.

Schools provide the single largest catchment area for majority of our young people.

According to the 2017 statistical abstract from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, Uganda had 8,655,924 pupils enrolled in primary, 1,457,277 enrolled at secondary level and 258,866 at tertiary level.

Therefore, schools provide a good opportunity to emphasise our core messaging on HIV and AIDS for young people.

Whereas majority of schools are quick to point out the many good things they are doing to make their students more knowledgeable about HIV and AIDS; they still face a big challenge of dealing with stigma. Many students living with HIV still find it difficult to fit into the system because of the constant mockery, harassment and finger pointing they face from fellow students and teachers.

On several occasions, teachers have been heard shouting out to young positives while questioning whether the gaps in their academic performance are as a result of their HIV status.

As a result, many children find it difficult to live productive positive lives.

They are unable to follow their medication routine because of fear to be seen taking the drugs. The stigma also affects their self-confidence and hence bringing down their morale to live a complete life. Young people are a core to the realisation of our set targets to end AIDS. Let us enumerate some of the programmes/interventions taking place in



schools targeting both children and teachers living with HIV/AIDS.

My appeal to schools and teachers is to understand that a pupil or teacher living with HIV in a school poses no risk whatsoever to the school community. Schools should educate themselves with the guidelines on how to support children and staff living with HIV.

These guidelines are available at the ministry of education and they spell out the most misunderstood key facts including the crucial issue that HIV cannot be passed on through play and childhood interactions.

As a way of increasing students' knowledge about HIV and AIDS, schools are encouraged to engage in classroom activities that allow students to learn and practice real life skills such as refusing pressures from peers, older men and women (sugar daddies and mummies), negotiating for safer choices or seeking professional help when in trouble.

The role play lessons and activities can also be used to demonstrate the role of parents and neighbouring communities in keeping our children safe.

For example, parents and communities have a responsibility of providing direct support to children, especially those that

living positively.

Parents need to open up to their children and encourage them about the need to take their drugs properly and regularly. Parents need to regularly tell their children even with HIV, one can also grow up to achieve their dreams in life. The Presidential Initiative on AIDS Strategy Communication to Youth (PIASCY) is a Ministry of Education programme that guides schools on communicating about HIV and AIDS.

PIASCY materials have been reviewed and have comprehensively incorporated stigma and discrimination.

The materials include PIASCY Teacher's Reference guide both primary and post primary education and training institutions. Training manuals have been used by key partners in the School Health and Reading Program to train teachers in HIV counseling, care, support skills and HIV/AIDS Stigma and Discrimination.

Uganda AIDS Commission has been worked closely with the Ministry of Education in development of the National Education Sexuality Framework on that will guide the delivery and the implementation of sexuality education so as to improve sexual reproductive health outcomes of adolescent and young people in schools.

The framework is now ready and being rolled out by MOES countrywide. The framework provides specific guidelines on how to handle and communicate appropriately to the different age groups in preparation and prevention of HIV and other sexuality related lessons.

I want encourage all schools to reach to the Ministry of education for a copy of this framework. Let us all work to end stigma in our schools.

The writer is the Acting Di

**Kenneth Muhangi**

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