

HOW FAR FROM HOME SHOULD A SCHOOL BE?

By Umar Nsubuga

On September 30, 2020, Haspha Nassolo gave birth to her fourth child, a girl she named Shanaz Nsubuga. For Nassolo, this was a blessing, a new life to nurture after two daughters and two sons. But the happiness did not last long. "My daughter started having recurrent eye problems. At first, I thought it was a minor infection, but with time, things got worse," Nassolo recalls. Little Nsubuga suffered from a congenital cataract, a condition that clouded her eyesight and required multiple surgeries before her first birthday. Her early months were marked by hospital visits, sleepless nights and endless prayers.

"We spent most of our time looking for the right doctors. Everyone kept referring us to Mengo Hospital, and that's where the diagnosis finally came," she says.

When Nsubuga turned four, her parents faced a new challenge — that of education. Finding a school suitable for a visually impaired child was not easy. After searching through several primary schools in Kampala, they discovered that the nearest appropriate one was in Entebbe. However, the family lives in Matugga, Wakiso district, nearly 40km away.

"I couldn't take her to boarding school because she was still too young and needed her mother's care. So, I decided to take her to school every day," Nassolo says.

Every morning, she wakes up at 4:00am to prepare Nsubuga, pack her breakfast, and by 5:00am, they are out of the house.

They take a taxi from Matugga to Bwaise, another to Busega, and then one more along the Entebbe Expressway. From there, a bodaboda takes them to school.

"I reach Entebbe around 7:30am, after dropping her off, I rush to my workplace in Lubowa. In the evening, I leave at 5:00pm, but because of traffic, I reach the school close to 7:00pm," she says, her voice heavy with fatigue.

The return journey is even harder. By the time they get to Matugga, it is often past 9:00pm.

"Sometimes, I find my daughter sitting at the school gate alone, waiting for me. It breaks my heart, but I have no choice," Nassolo says.

Despite the exhaustion, late-night risks, and financial strain, Nassolo remains steadfast.



A woman takes children to board a school van to school early in the morning. Experts say when children have to wake up early, their bodies are deprived of rest



A bodaboda rider takes a child to school at dawn

LONG JOURNEY TO SCHOOL

Haspha Nassolo's ordeal represents the silent struggle of thousands of parents across Uganda who wrestle with distance, safety, and time in their quest to give their children an education. For many, sending a child to boarding school is not an option, either due to cost, emotional attachment, or the child's age.

Charles Semakula, a resident of Kiryagonja village in Matugga, has a similar story. His son, a Primary Four pupil, studies in Kampala. Every morning, the boy is up by 5:30am, and they set off before sunrise to beat traffic jam.

"I sometimes keep him at my workplace until 8:00pm," Semakula says. "He does his homework in the conference room, then sleeps in the car when he gets tired. As a father, it hurts to see him this way, but I have no option."

"I pray every day for strength. One day, I believe my daughter will be independent and confident enough to stay in boarding school, maybe in Senior One," she says.

According to Charles Semakula, a resident of Kiryagonja village in Matugga, the situation worsens during exam periods. "My son sleeps for a few hours because we leave early and return late, I often wonder how his brain copes with all that fatigue," he says.

"Many parents feel their children are too young for boarding school, they want to bond with them and be part of their daily lives. But the price they pay, long commutes, sleepless nights, and constant anxiety, is high," says Grace

Munyambabazi, the principal education officer in Kabale district.

Children, however, bear the heaviest burden. Long distances often mean waking up before dawn, skipping breakfast, and enduring fatigue throughout the day.

"By the time some pupils reach class, they are already tired and hungry. It affects their concentration and they tend to perform poorly," says Jennifer Adong, the headteacher of Beyogoya Primary School in Lamwo district.

Patrick Oweka, a primary five pupil at Beyogoya Primary School in Palabek Kal village, Lamwo district, knows this struggle all too well. Every morning, he walks for one-and-a-half hours from Lamwo

town to school.

"I wake up at 5:00am, and start walking by 6:00am. Sometimes my legs hurt, especially when it rains. But I want to study and become a teacher," Oweka says.

His headteacher, Adong, says Oweka's case is not unique. "More than half of our pupils walk for over an hour each day, some come from as far as 5km away. When it rains, attendance drops sharply," Adong says.

The journey home is equally draining. By the time Oweka gets home, it is already dark. He eats supper quickly and falls asleep before finishing his homework.

"He is hardworking, but fatigue affects his learning," Adong adds.

HEALTH IMPACT

Dr Hassan Mayanja, a physician at Mercy Hospital in Mpererwe, Kampala, warns that the physical and emotional strain caused by long school commutes can have lasting health consequences.

"Children who wake up too early or get inadequate sleep may develop chronic fatigue, headaches, and poor concentration. Prolonged exposure to cold mornings or rain can also lead to respiratory infections such as pneumonia or asthma," Mayanja explains.

He adds that children who spend long hours on bodabodas or in traffic jam are

also at risk of accidents.

"We have seen cases where children fall asleep on motorcycles. It's a serious concern," he says. Sleep deprivation, Mayanja continues, can even affect mental health.

"The brain needs rest to function well. When a child's brain is overworked and under-rested, it can lead to irritability, anxiety, and poor academic performance."

WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW

According to last year's survey by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), students in Uganda walk an average of 1.8km each day to reach school. The report states that 87% of pupils walk between 0-3km, 10% between 3-5km, and 4% walk more than 5 km daily.

The UBOS report further reveals that long travel distances limit access to education, especially among children aged 6-12 years. Nearly 6% of boys and 4% of girls in this age group struggle to attend school regularly because of the distance.

William Asimwe, a professional counsellor, says while the distances may appear short on paper, for a six-year-old child carrying a heavy schoolbag and walking through rain or mud, even 2km can feel like a marathon, physically exhausting and mentally draining for such a young learner.

Fred Lutaaya, a school owner, says he has seen many parents struggling with the same dilemma.

"Some parents come as early as 6:00am to drop off their children, others pick them up after 8:00pm. It's emotionally draining for both parent and child," he says.

Lutaaya believes the

Government should prioritise constructing more community-based schools to reduce travel distances.

"Education should be accessible, when children live too far from school, they lose morale. Some even drop out," he says.

WHAT IS THE IDEAL DISTANCE?

Experts agree that the ideal walking distance for a primary school child should not exceed 2km, a journey of about 20 to 30 minutes. Anything beyond that puts unnecessary pressure on the child's physical and mental well-being.

"When children have to wake up before dawn, their bodies are deprived of rest; they become sluggish in class, and their productivity declines," Mayanja says.

Munyambabazi adds that long commutes also affect family life.

"Parents barely spend time with their children. By the time they return home, everyone is too tired to talk. The emotional connection weakens," he says.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Some communities have started local initiatives to ease the burden.

In some parts of the country, parents take turns driving or cycling groups of children to school.

Others have organised community hostels where children stay during the week and return home on weekends. Education experts also suggest that schools adopt flexible reporting times, especially in rural areas.

"If classes started at 8:30am instead of 7:30am, it would make a big difference. Children would not have to wake up at 5:00am to be on time," Asimwe says.