

# ABSENTEEISM: KEY DRIVER OF POOR PERFORMANCE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

JULY 2016

POLICY BRIEF NO. 4/16



## INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, Government committed to provide free education to all children of primary school going age. Through the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Uganda further committed to ensure delivery of a full course of primary education to all children by 2015. According to the MDG 2015 report, notable gains attributed to UPE include increased enrollment, a general upsurge in primary school completion, and the elimination of gender disparities between girls' and boys' completion rates. Achievements notwithstanding, the efficiency of Uganda's primary education is low - survival rate to P7 stands at 32.1%, repetition at 10.2% (EMIS, 2014), and teacher absenteeism is estimated at 20-30% (NPA, 2015).

In investigating factors affecting performance and drop out in primary schools emphasis has been placed on constraints like pupil-classroom ratios, pupil-textbook ratios, pupil-teacher ratios, teacher qualification as well as the education level and financial situation of parents and/or caretakers. Consequently, policy recommendations have been focused on the improvement of school facilities, particularly classroom resources and teacher training. Although these remain vital inputs in the delivery of effective education services, current evidence suggests that chronic absenteeism of both teachers and pupils poses a real threat to the effective delivery of education.

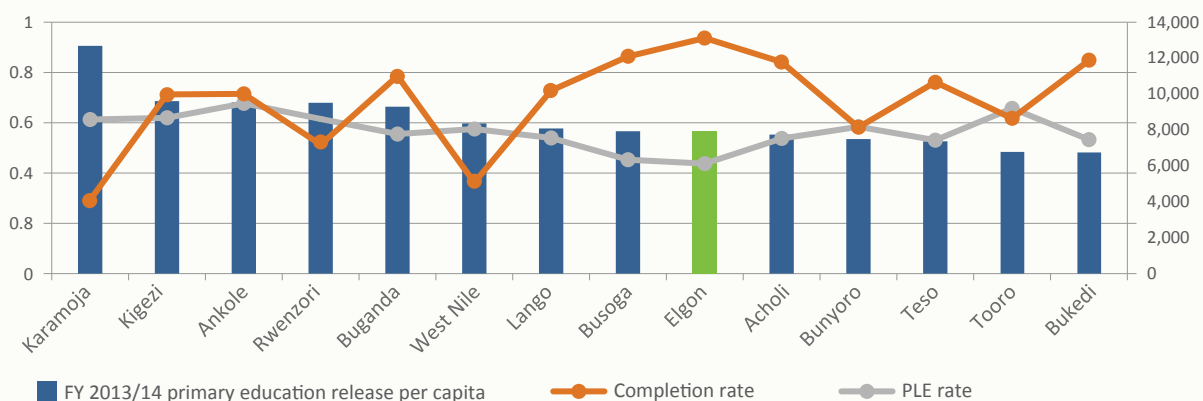
*Spatial analysis of budget allocations and pre-selected education indicators suggests that whilst receiving a primary education releases per capita lower than in eight other sub-regions, Elgon accounts for the highest completion rate nationwide. Notably, however, the same sub-region is associated with the poorest PLE performance in the country. The remainder of this brief presents a case study of the Elgon sub-region to provide a deeper understanding of the peculiar and concomitant relationship between high completion rates and poor PLE performance.*



## CASE STUDY: ELGON SUB-REGION

Spatial analysis of budget allocations and pre-selected education indicators presented in Figure 1 shows that whilst receiving a primary education releases per capita lower than eight other sub-regions, Elgon accounts for the highest completion rate (93%) nationwide. The same sub-region is associated with the poorest PLE performance (43%) in the country. Within Elgon sub-region, Figure 2 shows that in spite of comparable primary education releases per capita, Bukwo (UGX 84,915) and Bududa (UGX 88,597) districts have the highest (142%) and lowest (56%) completion rates, respectively. Notably, whereas high completion rates in Bukwo are associated with the second lowest PLE performance (34%) in the sub-region, low completion rates in Bududa are reported against the second highest PLE pass rate (49%) in the sub-region.

**Figure 1: Primary education release per capita vs. Completion and PLE performance rates (EMIS, 2014)**



**Figure 2: Primary education release per capita vs. Completion and PLE performance rates (EMIS, 2014)**

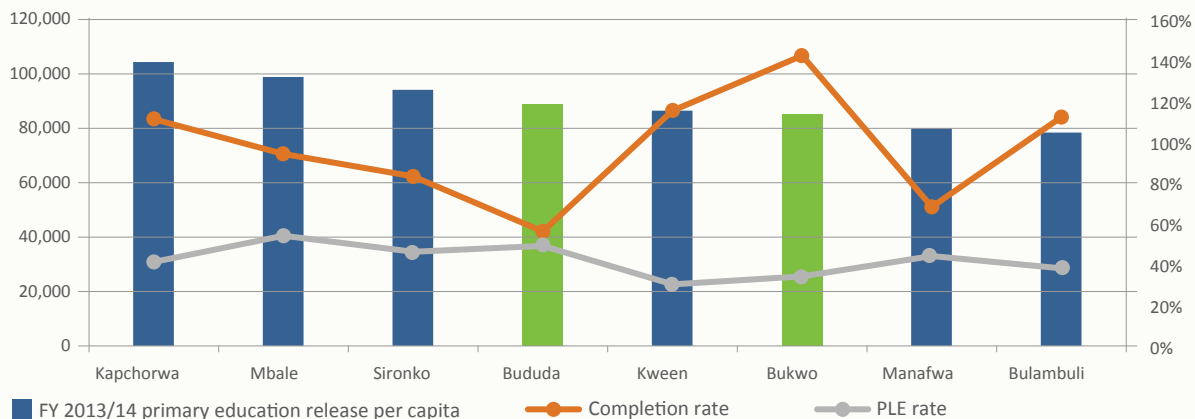
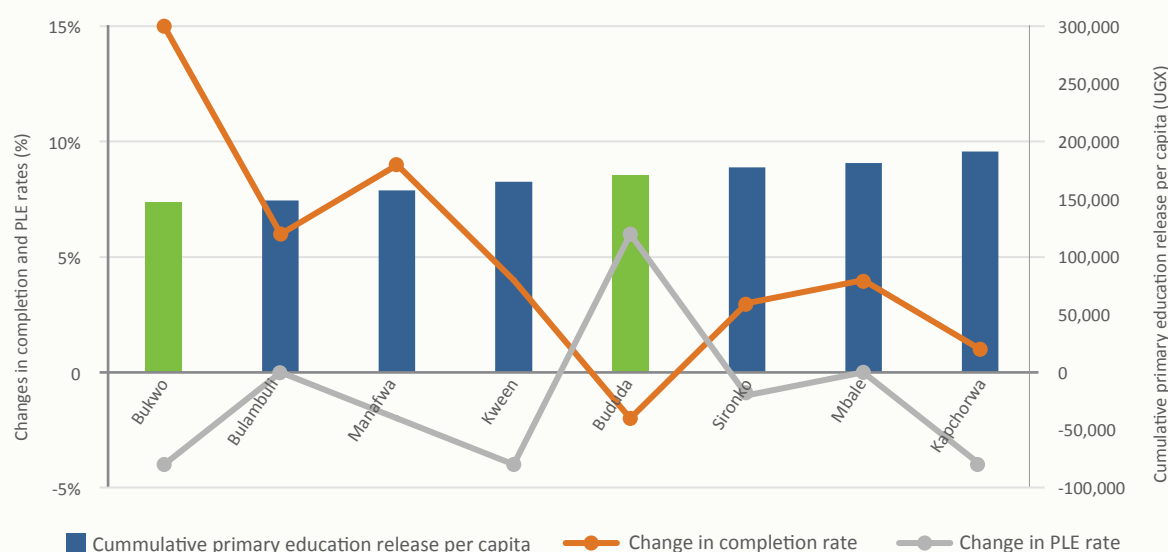


Figure 3 corroborates the evidence presented above by showing cumulative allocations vis-à-vis outcome performance between FY 2012/13 and FY 2013/14. In doing so, it highlights growing inequities in primary education releases per capita within the Elgon sub-region. Whereas in FY 2013/14 the difference in primary education releases between Bududa and Bukwo was approx. equal to UGX 4,000 (Figure 2), the cumulative difference in FY 2012/13 and FY 2013/14 is nearly six times higher (UGX 24,000). Arguably, sustained funding for primary education may explain Bududa's marked improvement in PLE performance. This 6% increase in the PLE performance rate, however, was associated with a 2% decline in completion. To complicate matters further, in spite of lower cumulative releases per capita, whilst recording one of the largest reductions in PLE performance (4%), completion in Bukwo district increased by an unmatched 15%. The next section aims to provide a deeper understanding of the status of education services in the Elgon sub-region by exploring the complex interplay of financial and non-financial factors responsible for marked variations in district specific performance.

**Figure 3: Cumulative primary release per capita vs. Changes in completion and PLE rates (FY 2012/13 and FY 2013/14)**



## EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

Field assessment involved key informant interviews with district staff, teachers, head teachers, pupils and community members. Findings from both individual and group level consultations in the selected districts brought to light a number of factors impacting completion and pass rates. These included culture, facilities in schools, economic activities, government policies, staffing, school management, formal inspection and Local Government administration. In both districts, **absenteeism** was distinctly identified as one of the most alarming phenomena in the delivery of efficient and effective education services.

Evidence from the field revealed that teacher absenteeism or “late coming” was almost unequivocally associated with correspondingly high rates of pupil absenteeism and late coming. At the time of monitoring the likelihood of children missing school, performing poorly or dropping out of schools was invariably highly correlated with the absence of teachers from the classroom. A holistic approach to addressing the factors that cause absenteeism is critical to improve performance in primary schools.

Notably, the commendable PLE results in Bududa district was attributed to a small sample of schools benefiting from regular provisions of scholastic materials, mentoring of school administration, school feeding programmes, and most importantly monthly assessments largely supported by non-governmental outreach programmes. On a related note, great variation in completion rates between Bududa and Bukwo seemed to result from the poor understanding and application of the automatic promotion system. Across the two districts, school attendance is very low in the course of the term and peaks during pre-determined periods to gather enrolment figures and at the sitting of end of term examinations. In addition to partly explaining the reported high completion and low PLE performance, this evidence casts serious doubt on the validity of completion to measure sector performance.

“Even children who go to school on a daily basis end up failing because they are not taught, when we report to the district no action is taken, so what is the use of sending a child to school every day? They would rather help in generating additional household income as well as save us the cost of school feeding with no returns.”

*Chebinyiny Sub County, FGD*

In terms of poor school attendance, notwithstanding Government efforts to raise awareness and advocate for greater parental involvement in terms of both social and financial support, parents remain hesitant to support children in terms of providing funds for the purchase of scholastic materials and/or school feeding. Without meals children attend school until they get hungry, prior to engaging directly or indirectly in alternative income generating activities. This is especially the case during Bududa's notorious market days of Tuesday and Thursday. In Bukwo trade is mostly linked to its proximity to the Kenyan border with teachers' attendance being more affected.

In this context, girl children become especially vulnerable to early marriage and school dropout. To this effect, the enforcement of laws on early marriage remains generally weak and characterized by non-responsiveness of the justice system. Worse still, paralegals and non-qualified legal practitioners often encourage parents to opt for cash or in-kind out of court settlement when dealing with defilers.

Evidence from the field further reveals that at school level, teachers have not been adequately facilitated to deliver on their duties. Major setbacks include the poor classification of "hard to reach" and "hard to stay areas", the nonpayment of hard to reach allowances and inadequate housing, which coupled with topography and unconducive weather conditions were reported as the major reasons for teacher absenteeism and late coming. Out of the 90 public primary schools in Bududa, only 8 appear to be served with teacher housing, yet more than 30% of schools are in hard to reach and hard to stay areas. Teacher absenteeism is further fueled by inadequacy of school inspection due to staffing gaps in the inspectorate and lack of funds. To address this shortcoming, Government officials in Bukwo district have attempted to utilize lower Local Government structures for school inspection. Notably, institutional gaps and communication challenges (e.g. lack of verbal or written feedback from inspection activities) between these lower Local Government structures at sub-county level and the district inspectorate pose seemingly unsurmountable hurdles.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants and key informants in Bukwo also identified inefficiency of local administration at both district and school level as significant contributors to teacher as well as pupil absenteeism and demotivation. FGDs with teachers revealed that the criteria of appointments and promotion of teachers does not depend on experience and competencies, let alone performance. District education officers and a number of head teachers further reported that many of the teachers recruited in the district were incompetent and accorded more time to business in neighbouring Kenya as opposed to teaching. For Bukwo specifically, the need to audit and review teacher appointments as well as evaluate teacher training college standards was indicated as a high priority. Similar concerns were raised with regards to School Management Committees (SMC) in terms of their technical competence and ability to hold stakeholders accountable for poor educational outcomes.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### i. Enhance quality of services and promote greater accountability

- a. Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports (MoESTS) to enforce minimum standards on teacher recruitment, and issue clear guidance on SMC membership qualifications.
- b. In close collaboration with District Education Officers (DEOs) and Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), MoESTS to penalize teacher absenteeism with disciplinary measures (e.g. salary cuts, suspension and/or revocation of teacher qualifications).
- c. In close collaboration with District Education Officers (DEOs) and Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), MoESTS to revisit qualifying criteria for "hard to reach" and "hard to stay" areas and issue allowances accordingly.

### ii. Enhance policy implementation and awareness

- a. In liaison with Local Governments, MoESTS to enhance sensitization programmes for greater parental involvement.

- b. MoESTS to review the automatic promotion policy setting minimum qualification standards to advance to subsequent grades.
- c. Local Governments to enable effective participation in schools by revisiting timing of market days.

### iii. Strengthen monitoring and inspection in schools

- a. MoESTS to empower sub-county education officers to increase intensity and scope of monitoring for improved school attendance and performance.
- b. DEOs to synchronize sub-county and district inspection reports, and provide schools with timely feedback, key recommendations and follow-up actions.
- c. Head teachers to institutionalize measures for periodic assessments of progress and learner competencies, whilst providing continuous guidance and counselling to motivate attendance.

#### FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Margaret Kakande, Head / BMAU, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development  
Margaret.Kakande@finance.go.ug

Diego Angemi, Chief / Social Policy and Advocacy, UNICEF, Uganda  
dangemi@unicef.org