

Janet order on ‘backdoor’ admissions brings change

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Education minister Janet Museveni

In 2017, first lady Janet Museveni attended the annual selection/placement exercise as Education minister for the first time.

She wasted no time expressing her dismay at, and banning, ‘backdoor admissions’ – a long-standing though rather dubious practice of ‘special lists’ sent by ministry officials for admissions to top schools outside of the merit-based entries. Two years down the road, YUDAYA NANGONZI makes a follow-up assessment.

Times are quickly changing. Increasingly, a parent must now directly meet a school head to make a case for their child. No more openly favoured status for education ministry officials.

In the past, the heads of top public schools were constantly under pressure from these officials and other influential types to admit their sons, daughters, or other dependants whose names were always sent through the backdoor at the expense of those who deserved a place.

It had become so intolerable that in 2017, the Education minister advised head teachers: “Ignore all these commissioners who will come with lists of students. In case you don’t report them directly to the permanent secretary, head teachers will be held accountable for every single student admitted otherwise into their schools.”

At the just-ended 2019 selections, *The Observer* sampled 10 schools and found a more relaxed feel about the representatives from Iganga SS, Nabisunsa Girls School, Namilyango College, Gayaza High School, Mengo SS, Mt St Mary’s College Namagunga, Immaculate Heart Girls School Rukungiri, Bweranyangi Girls School, Lubiri SS and Kibibi SS.

The director of studies (DoS) at Immaculate Heart, Charles Mbamanya, said; “We have not received any lists in the two years. They would give you a list of candidates whose marks are worse than those admitted on merit.”

“If your cut-off is aggregate six [for senior one], they send you people in second and third grades. How do you expect someone with aggregate 16 to match the competition of those you have admitted?”

Mbamanya revealed how ministry officials would justify the corruption of the selection process by claiming “that these are children of officers serving outside the country like in embassies and UPDF officers on certain missions”.

The officials claimed that while such officers are away, their children must be catered for by the ministry, Mbamanya said. This was largely untrue. Most of the children on those lists tended to be related to the ministry officials in one way or another.

The exercise had been so heavily compromised that during selections, head teachers from top schools were herded into closed-door meetings. Shady lists were then shared and they would be pressured into receiving “illegal” students.

Today, these head teachers sit in the general hall with everybody else. According to Mbamanya, unlike ministry directives, special groups such as foundation bodies and old students associations negotiate to have their children or siblings admitted “whenever space is available”.

This year, Immaculate Heart admitted 240 students into senior one, selling at least 1,365 students with aggregate seven to 28. The DoS at Namilyango College, Aron Mweru, says more officials and wealthy parents now visit the school to seek placements.

“I don’t want to say things are still the same because we don’t get the lists anymore. I think this is some relief because we have a chance to directly interact with our would-be parents/students,” says Mweru.

As our interview progressed, a head teacher from another school put in a word. His son got aggregate five. He pleaded with Mweru to recommend him to King's College Budo. Mweru told the head teacher to visit Budo for guidance.

While Namilyango's cut-off was aggregate six, Mweru said they can take aggregate seven students too. This year, out of the 1,054 applications, Namilyango admitted at least 25 students with aggregate four.

Denis Mukunzi, the deputy head teacher in charge of academics at Bweranyangi Girls' School, said if admissions are fairly conducted, every child can excel.

"Sometimes, you get students with four but those you admit last with aggregate seven maintain their performance. Yet, some few fours will keep up and others get lost along senior two and three and you wonder what happened to them," Mukunzi said.

RAY OF HOPE

The deputy head teacher (academics) at Mengo SS, Mary Kalyango Mukasa, said: "When the ministry ceased sending us lists, people now find a courteous way of requesting for admissions or write on small chits but not commanding as it were in the past."

"If we have space, we admit them; if not, we advise them to try elsewhere and they adhere."

At Nabisunsa, the school's careers master, Ibrahim Ssendawula, says whoever wants a place; you individually visit the school without compromising the school system.

"Right now, it's on first come, first served basis. There's no guarantee that because you hold a certain office, you will be admitted first," Ssendawula said.

"Things have changed so much. Today, you all come and wait on the bench for your turn."

"We can drop a child with aggregate five who didn't give us first choice and take that of aggregate six who showed first interest in our school. You must show love and trust in the school no matter your parent's influence in the country," he added.

Another positive outcome of the minister's directive, according to Ssendawula, is that schools now know exactly what they are taking in. In most cases, he recalls, the ministry would send names of students on illegal lists without indicating their P7 or S4 results.

For Kibibi SS, Musa Tamale, the careers/examinations secretary, said; "The lists used to be many; this is from the permanent secretary, director, minister, commissioner, etc. It was overwhelming! [But] once a parent talks directly to the head teacher, you get this sympathy that someone is interested in your school," Tamale said.

"If the backdoor problem was at 75 per cent by the time she [Janet] made the directive, it is now at 40 per cent."

He, however, adds that reporting officials is not enough. The long-term answer is to have more public schools with sound academic performance. This is because other influential people outside the education ministry continue flocking their schools.

Meanwhile, Iganga SS faces a unique dilemma. This is a girls' school which only admits visually impaired males. A staffer who preferred anonymity told *The Observer* that pressures from wealthy parents and some NGOs which support children with disability persist.

“We got some relief with ministry and RDC lists but NGOs remain a challenge. Whenever they send a child and you deny them admission, they accuse us of discrimination yet we have inadequate facilities,” the staffer said.

For instance, visually impaired students need braille machines yet each costs between Shs 3 million and Shs 4 million; a ream of special paper to type their work goes for Shs 300,000 and embossers that turn soft copy into braille range between Shs 60 million and Shs 120 million.

And then, a school would need Job Access With Speech software, which costs about Shs 2m. With such demands, Iganga SS can admit not more than 30 students.

AN APPEAL

At Mt St Mary's College Namagunga, one employee who declined to be named appealed to Janet to make public a hotline to her office. Some officials still try to manipulate the system, the employee said.

“I think the ministry of Education officials fear to be grilled by the first lady but we still get headed letters to admit children from parliament, bishops, local government and ministry of energy officials,” the staff said.

“These people are abusing their workplaces because they are aware that education officials can no longer assist them to access our schools.”

On the other hand, Lubiri SS staff say they have to deal with people who claim they have been recommended by either Buganda kingdom officials or State House.

“We need clarification from State House about its beneficiaries. So far, we have got three people this term under the guise of State House seeking admission for their children in senior one,” says the staff.

“Some show us headed letters from State House [that it will also pay fees] but take their letters. It's just a few who we admit that leave us with copies. Sometimes, when we probe, people get angry and leave with their documents.”

Senior presidential press secretary Don Wanyama told *The Observer* that head teachers are encouraged to report such cases.

“Let me make this very clear... State House doesn’t interfere with any admission guidelines or policies in schools because we don’t have powers to subvert that process. If we are going to help anyone, whether it’s school fees or medical bills, officials from State House directly get in touch with an institution,” Wanyama said.

“It’s not true that we send letters to schools and no one should bring a paper to school claiming that they are from State House and wants a placement in any school.”

At the end of the day, it also comes down to the choices students make. Parents and teachers were advised by Benson Kule, who chairs the selection committee, to help students make the right school choices.

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