

Kenya: Free Education is Costly for Orphans

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By Harold Ayodo

The announcement that the Government had introduced free secondary education was music to Joyline Ogello's ears.

Finally, thought the 16-year-old orphan, she did not have to worry about school fees, even if her sponsor for the past three years discontinued support, for whatever reason.

She was wrong. Last week, the Form Three student was sent away from Kisumu Girls High School because of fees arrears. At the beginning of the year, ActionAid Italy withdrew her bursary because secondary school education is now free.

The free learning initiative pays Sh10,2065 of every student in a public secondary school to cover tuition, maintenance, administration and utility costs. Parents and guardians cater for uniforms, lunch and boarding charges.

The ministry claims that for students in day schools, learning is practically free. It says boarding schools should not charge more than Sh18,000 but principals have largely ignored the directive.

Needy students like Ogello have learnt the hard way that the reality is different. "I cannot explain why misfortune follows me but I am not giving up on my dream of becoming a doctor, she says.

Her mother passed away when she was in Standard Six and her father two years later. But she beat the odds and scored 386 marks out of 500 in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination and was awarded a scholarship by ActionAid Italy through ActionAid Kenya and the Kisumu Town Fish Youth Group (KTFYG).

Mr Richard Obudho, KTFYG coordinator, says donors froze financial aid for the education orphans and vulnerable children early this year. In 2000, ActionAid Italy gave KTFYG Sh8 million for the education of the children. Further disbursements were stopped following the introduction of free secondary education, he says.

One of the goals of the free learning policy is to increase transition rate from primary to secondary schools by enabling needy students to access education.

But for Kevin Omolo, just like Ogello, the initiative is a nightmare. Omolo, another beneficiary of ActionAid bursary was forced to transfer to Kisumu Boys High School, a day scholar, because he could not afford boarding fees at Amira High School in Siaya after his bursary was withdrawn. In better times, three years ago, the son of a watchman scored 404 in the KCPE examination.

Obudho says 27 other students, out of which 17 are candidates, have been kicked out of school for lack of school fees. They include three girls who have since become pregnant and boys who now eke out a living cleaning cars, fishing and hawking in Kisumu.

He says he is disheartened because many of them are bright. "Our mission is to see these children through school but we cannot achieve it without funds. What has happened is painful," says Obudho.

The story is much the same for many other community based organisations and non-governmental organisations across Nyanza, a province with the highest numbers of orphans because of the high prevalence of Aids.

Reverend Kenneth Wachianga, the director of Amani Child Development Program (ACDP), says 10 children supported by the institution have dropped out of school after donor funds dried up. "Donors from the United States and Australia withdrew their support following the introduction of free secondary education, he says. "We have been seeking funds from other sources with little success because donors interpreted the term 'free' literally," he says.

Although we have tried to elaborate the situation, some have argued that the children have already been locked out of this year's budget," says Wachianga.

The needy children have not received much sympathy from the Government. "The ministry directive is being implemented as we await further instructions," says Nyanza Provincial Director of Education, Mr Geoffrey Cherongis.

But the students have not thrown in the towel.

Ogello still wakes up at dawn to read using a tin lamp and hopes that a well wisher will come to her rescue. She is convinced that education is the only way out of poverty. "I have nothing else to depend on apart from education," she says.

Today, Vincent Chiaga, 20, makes gravel out of rocks to raise school fees, which he sells for Sh2, 000 for each lorry. "KTFYG informed me that there are no funds to support my education this year," he says. Four years ago, he scored 366 marks out of 500 in KCPE at Obwolo Primary School. My aim is to raise the Sh12, 100 fees including Sh3,100 KCSE examination registration fee, says Chiaga who wants to study medicine. He supports eight siblings.

His worst fear is that he will be unable to sit the examination. "I began by skipping school once a week but circumstances have forced me to be a full-time casual labourer", he says.