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THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

Ministry of Education and Sports

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CIRCULAR NO. 20

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Executive Director, KCCA
All Chief Administrative Officers
All District Education Officers
All District Inspectors of schools
All Municipal Town Clerks
All Municipal Education Officers
All Headteachers of Primary schools
All Heads of Post Primary Education Institutions

PRIOTIZING MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION AND CARE IN EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The outbreak of COVID -19 and the closure of schools had significant effect on the growth and development of children including the teaching learning process. Many teachers and learners suffered from loss of social interactions that the learning institutions offered, a number of children exposed to online learning but also risks of grooming and exploitation, domestic violence and neglect, child pregnancies, HIV/STIs and forced marriages. Children were exposed to negative coping mechanisms including self- harm, suicidal thoughts, alcohol and substance use that accelerated their vulnerability to mental illness. According to Kuntz (2020), COVID-19 was described as an acute stressor that could induce trauma and destabilize individuals including their work potential and relationship with others.

The lockdown period created a shift in power dynamics as a number of men were rendered incapable of sufficiently providing for their families, marriages shattered, 'a baby boom' as the country registered the highest numbers of child pregnancies, many risky abortions carried out and some learners lost their lives. While the emotional

wellbeing of children and young adolescents is central to their learning, balance and stability in life, the COVID-19 situation exposed children and adolescents to violence, neglect, grief and severe life changes, early marriages which are likely to trigger early onset of mental ill health in adolescents. The effects of COVID-19 continue to ignite the risk of depression, anxiety and stress among adolescents as a population group that was less prioritized in the fight against COVID-19. Globally, half of all mental illnesses start by the age of 14, and mental illness affects 16% of adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19. Even teachers were equally affected at personal, family and professional levels, their resilience depleted; making teaching- learning process compromised.

The re-opening of learning institutions and the revised guidelines on management of teenage pregnancies and re-entry of child mothers in school ensured the Right to Education for the girls and boys. Though the medical and economic consequences of COVID- 19 are well-known, staff and children's behaviors show high mental health challenges including anxiety, stress, depression, suicidal attempts, alcohol and substance use. Unfortunately, many teachers like their learners continue to exhibit multiple emotional and psychological failures that hinder class attendance, participation and learning achievement.

The Ministry of Education and Sports, through the Department of Guidance & Counselling with support from USAID/LARA developed *The Psychosocial support training guide* to help orient the school staff to build resilience among learners. However, the teachers trained are overwhelmed by the mental health challenges, tight school programs, limited support from other staff, and limited capacity to address the different mental health issues. The Ministry of Education is committed and continue to work closely with the different partners to enhance the capacity of learning institutions to support emotional recovery for effective teaching learning process.

In the medium term, the following actions should be observed in all learning institutions across the country:

1. Designate 2 staff to serve as a senior woman and man teacher/instructors who will coordinate the guidance and counselling activities for learners and staff.
2. Orient the designated staff on their roles using the Ministry of Education & Sports *Guidelines for Senior Man/woman*. Neither of the designated staff will

sit on the disciplinary committee as this compromises the quality of care and rapport.

3. Constitute a guidance and counselling committee chaired by the senior woman or man, with either of them serving as alternate chair. The committee should have at least 4 members, but not more than 7 members. The committee should identify the common mental health or psychosocial issues among learners and staff for appropriate care, linkage or referral support.
4. Institutions should review their programs/routine to accommodate group or peer or individual intervention counselling sessions for appropriate recovery support. Every learning institution should allocate time/timetable for at least ONE HOUR every week to implement basic counselling and psychosocial support interventions. Each institution should keep a record of learners/emotional issues affecting learners or staff.
5. Education institutions should allocate at least 1% of its resources to cater for specialized services for staff or learners challenged by emotional and mental health threats including referral or transfers for complex assessment and management.
6. Learning institutions are encouraged to engage professional counsellor/psychologist to handle complicated psychosocial emotional issues. Where the institution is not able to contract her own counselling expert, cases should be referred to the nearest health centre III or hospital for specialised care.
7. Each learning institution should map the partners and individuals within their geographical location who could have the technical expertise to enhance wellbeing and mental health. To strengthen the partnership and collaboration between learning institutions and other mental health services providers, a directory of active partners will be kept at the institution, termly and annual reports submitted to the local Education department and MoES respectively.
8. The institutional leadership should liaise with the responsible offices to train its staff in basic guidance and counselling skills including emerging ethical issues, approaches, research, policies and guidelines.
9. School leaders should also take advantage of online support services/ Teletherapy to address emotional distress or depression among staff and

learners. This service is provided by *Strong Minds Uganda* through dialing *252*10# for free counseling. Registration is free on MTN network, Airtel charges shillings 160 to register.

10. All institutions should therefore prioritize the mental health of its members to minimize the different learning and developmental disorders especially among learners and young staff.



Ismael Mulindwa

For: PERMANENT SECRETARY

Copy: First lady and Minister of Education and Sports
Ministers of State for Education and Sports
Chairperson, Parliamentary Committee on Education
Chairperson, Parliamentary Committee on Children
Chairperson, Parliamentary Committee on Health
All Resident District Commissioners
All District Chairpersons, LCV
All Chairpersons, District Education Committees
All District Directors of Health Services
All Chairpersons, Governing Councils
All Chairpersons, Boards of Governors
All Chairpersons, School Management Committees
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