

## **STUDENTS' ABSENTEEISM: A SILENT KILLER OF UNIVERSAL SECONDARY EDUCATION (USE) IN UGANDA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Education has a huge impact on any human society and it can safely be assumed that no society is optimally functional until it is properly educated. In the global perspective, it is an undeniable fact that the progress of a nation is very much dependent on the education of its citizens. Similarly, in Uganda education is a fundamental human right and it is the duty of the state to promote free and compulsory education to the citizens. This constitutional mandate gave birth to free education from primary to secondary under Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) since 1997 and 2007 respectively. The purpose of this study was to investigate the major causes of students' absenteeism; and the possible solutions to the vices in Universal Secondary Education Schools in Uganda. The study applied a descriptive cross sectional research design. The study also employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches/methods. Data was collected using secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources consisted of publications, reports and literature related to students' absenteeism whilst primary data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics from the study population of one thousand (1000) constituting a sample of 278 respondents of which 226 returned their fully completed questionnaires giving a response rate at 81.3%; obtained from 17 out of 36 USE schools in the four (4) districts of Serere, Ngora, Soroti and Kumi comprised of 07, 04, 03, and 03 USE schools respectively. The four districts were considered because they have all categories of secondary schools in Uganda.

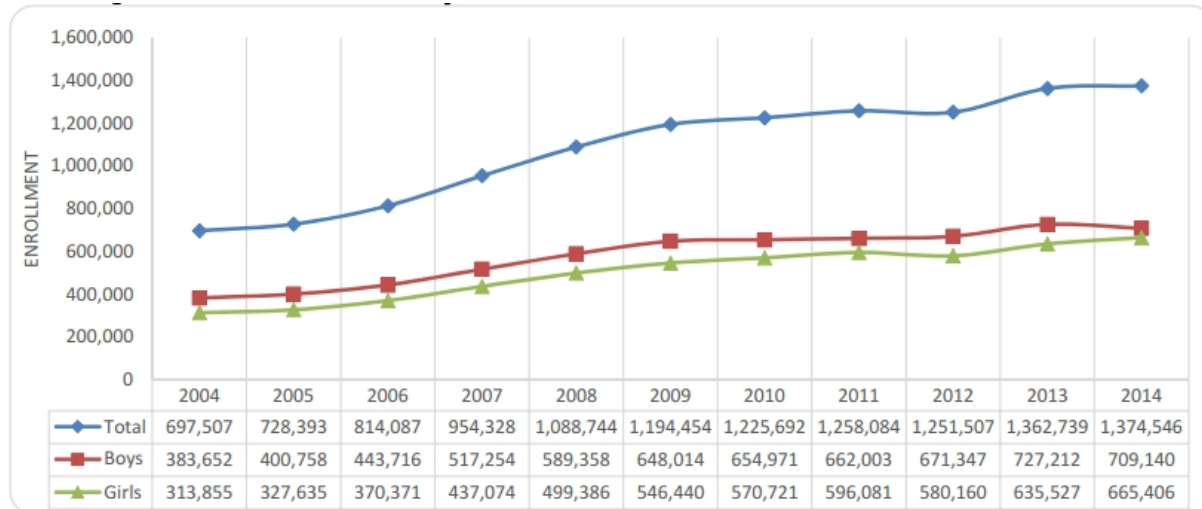
The study findings showed that; Lack of scholastic requirements, household work, lack of interest in education, hunger at school/lack of mid-day meals, sexual harassment at school, long distance to school, illness or disease, loss of parent or close relative, peer influence, and harsh punishment at school were the top ten (10) causes of students' absenteeism in USE schools respectively. These causes were both un excused (64.5%) and excused (35.5%). Furthermore, the empirical study also shows that; the average rate of students' absenteeism is 23.18% in day schools as compared to 3.25% in boarding schools. The mainly affected categories were; children from poor families, children living far from school, female students, orphans, disabled, male students, and children living with single parent as reported by the respondents during the study. The study recommends that; parents understand their responsibility, government reduces taxes on scholastics materials/provides them free, improve the household income, the government and development partners to support school feeding programme, need to introduce open schooling system, and schools be held accountable for improving attendance, and finally, future researchers should examine the relationship between the District Education Officers and Secondary Schools Administration; Teacher qualification and students' academic performance, and Effects of students absenteeism on students' academic/school performance.

***Key Words: Students, Absenteeism, Education, Universal Secondary Education (USE), Uganda***

### **1.0 Brief History of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Uganda**

Following the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, enrolment in primary schools has risen from 2.7 million to over 7.6 million pupils, Juuko et al., (2007). This mass increase in enrolment at primary level had very serious implications as they transited to the next level of education in terms of the number of students that sought admission into secondary by 2003. This prompted the sector to undertake a series of studies which culminated into the development of the Universal Post Primary Education and Training (UPPET) Strategy 2003. The strategy provided a number of policy options to government on how to enhance access to secondary education as a way of sustaining the gains under the UPE programme.

In light of the above, the adoption of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007 highlights some of the success stories in the sub-sector as stipulated in the Uganda Education Statistical Abstract, 2009 that include but not limited to: USE has subsequently increased the transition rate from P7 to S1 by 22% from 46.9% to 68.6% and enrolment at secondary education increased from 814,087, 954,328, and 1,187,785 in 2006, 2007 and 2011 respectively in secondary schools of which 689,541 students are on USE programme, MoES: Uganda Education Statistical Abstract, 2011). In 2012, 2013 and 2014; the total enrolment in USE schools increased by 9.04% from 689,541 to 751,867; 7.3% from 751,867 to 806,992 and 8.2% 806,992 to 873,476 respectively as highlighted in the MoES sector annual performance report for financial year 2013/2014. In addition, the sector has also made strides in recruiting some of the teachers required and provision of facilities in 38 sub-counties without any form of secondary school in the country. Furthermore, the number of schools receiving government funding increased from 30.8% in 2010 to 56.2% in 2011. This is as a result of government's continued partnership with the private sector in the implementation of USE, (MoES: Uganda Education Statistical Abstract, 2011). Looking at secondary school enrollment by grade and gender in 2010, whereas the number of S1 students was 324,000, the numbers of S2-S4 students decreased by 10-15% and the number of S4 students was 220,000. The number of S5 and S6 students was 79,000 and 68,000 respectively, falling to around 20% of the number of S1 students. In all grades, the number of enrolled boys exceeded the number of enrolled girls, and this disparity was especially large in S4 according to MoES: Uganda Education Statistical Abstract 2010 as cited by JICA, 2012 report.



**Figure 1: Trend of Secondary Education Enrollment by Gender from 2004 to 2014**

*Source: MoES: Education Management Information System, 2014*

Although considerable evidence has been collected on increasing rates of student enrolment in schools across the world, most education systems in developing countries do not collect or analyse attendance data on a consistent basis. In the absence of reliable data, there is little definitive information, (Teachers' Union, April 2010). However, periodic studies and anecdotal observations in many countries particularly Uganda show that 'enrolled' students are frequently not in school.

Throughout the 1970s, American high school principals consistently identified poor attendance as the major problem facing secondary school administrators. But rather than define poor attendance, studies concentrated on examining factors associated with it, Rothman, (2001). Wright, (1978) as cited by Rothman, 2001; analyses secondary school-level data in Virginia, surveying schools on their attendance rates and aspects of the curriculum, organisation and staff. The researcher found statistically significant differences by location: urban schools had the lowest attendance rates, then suburban schools; and schools in other areas had the highest attendance rates. Within these geographical groupings, different factors were related to attendance rates, including subject offerings (electives), work programs for school and age of the teaching staff as added by Wright, (1978). In addition, DeJung & Duckworth, (1986) study reported students' absenteeism rates for the whole-day as; 4.4 per cent for the larger district and 2.8 per cent for the smaller. The researchers also asked students why they were absent from individual class periods; 20 per cent of students stated that they had "other things to do," rather than attend school for a day; illness and personal problems accounted for less than 10 per cent of absences. Rothman, (2001) states that; students with very high absence rates identified parties, drugs and a general dislike of school for most of their absences.

Furthermore, Peters & Kethley, (2002) found that class attendance did not affect students' examinations performance. In contrast, Marburger, (2001) reveals that students who missed on a given day were significantly more likely to respond incorrectly to the questions relating to material covered that day than students who were present. Contributing to the same debate, Reid, (2005) agrees that; when students are absent from school, there are a wide range of short term educational

consequences that they face; first and foremost, students miss out on assignments and as a result, they are more likely to underachieve or perform poorly. Durden & Ellis, (2003) found that class attendance and motivation were related; and they notes that if motivation is not controlled for, the effect of absence from class on performance may be overstated.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Uganda is currently implementing a policy for USE to increase development and sustain the gains in enrollment provided by UPE, in an attempt to decrease poverty and meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The USE policy has considerably improved the enrollment rates to public secondary schools from poor households, however, there are still lots more to be done to improve the quality of secondary education in Uganda.

Despite, the governments' effort to provide tuition, teachers, infrastructure and instructional materials to USE participating schools, students' absenteeism is an alarming problem for administrators, teachers, parents and the society in general. However, there have been many studies on the problem worldwide, considerable knowledge gaps exists on the subject in Uganda because many of the available studies were conducted on teachers' absenteeism; causes of drop outs in primary schools; and teachers' support for the USE programme. It is in this light that this study was carried out to investigate the causes of students' absenteeism; and finding the possible solutions to students' absenteeism in Universal Secondary Education in Uganda.

## **2.3 The Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the major causes of students' absenteeism in Universal Secondary Education schools in Uganda.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study includes:

- i. Since the USE policy is relatively new in Sub-Sahara Africa, not many surveys or researches have been done evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of the policy, thus the study findings will be deemed useful to the professionals, researchers, students, and the Ugandan Government in educational planning policy so as to formulate policies which can benefit poor students or apply stiff penalties to parent/ and student against those who absent themselves or are involved in manual work during class hours.
- ii. The results of this study may also provide suggestions to policy makers at the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in Uganda to come up with interventions that will enhance students' retention in schools.
- iii. The teachers as street bureaucrats will also use the findings to assist the parents and the students to ensure that they complete secondary education and proceed onto higher institutions of learning for professional course(s) in larger numbers.
- iv. The findings would also be useful to political leaders, parents, students and community at large since they contribute to educational resources hence they would work, hand in hand, in promoting internal efficiency of educational system by eradicating those factors that would lead to absenteeism of their children from school.
- v. Finally, although the focus of this current study was Uganda, the findings provide an important reference material for those implementing similar policy or intending to replicate USE policy.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

This section examines and summarizes the literature that relate to study. The literature was obtained from secondary sources such as; text books, journals, research papers and reports.

### **2.1.0 Absenteeism Defined**

Absenteeism, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary means chronic absence. In the context of the school it is the habitual or intentional failure from going to school. Absenteeism cannot be denied because every now and then, students may miss some school activities and lessons and it becomes a problem if the student is away from school for many days. According to Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012); chronic absenteeism is typically based on total days of school missed, including both excused and unexcused absences. The authors add that, chronic absenteeism is often defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days; in practical terms this translates into 18 days a year; on the other hand missing 20 percent or more of school, 40 or more days, is defined as severely or excessively chronically absent. In this regard, chronic absenteeism is not the same as truancy. Thus, truancy is typically defined as a certain number or certain frequency of unexcused absences as suggested by, Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012). However, the State Board of Education (2013) states that; a student is considered to be “in attendance” if present at his/her assigned school, or an activity sponsored by the school (e.g., field trip), for at least half of the regular school day. Therefore, a student who is serving an out-of-school suspension or expulsion should always be considered absent. The State Board of Education, (2013) adopted definitions for excused and unexcused absences for use by schools and districts in order to implement the statutory policies and procedures concerning truants, and the reporting of truancy offers the three forms students’ absenteeism:

#### **2.1.1 Excused Absences**

A student’s absence from school shall be considered excused if written documentation of the reason for the absence has been submitted within ten school days of the student’s return to school and meets the following criteria:

- A. For absences one through nine, a student’s absences from school are considered excused when the student’s parent/guardian approves such absence and submits appropriate documentation; and
- B. For the tenth absence and all absences thereafter, a student’s absences from school are considered excused for the following reasons:
  1. Student illness (All student illness absences must be verified by an appropriately licensed medical professional to be deemed excused, regardless of the length of absence);
  2. Student’s observance of a religious holiday;
  3. Death in the student’s family or other emergency beyond the control of the student’s family such as: family member who is very ill and close to dying, student’s home is lost to fire or eviction, family’s home being quarantined, natural disaster, a student who is a parent and whose child needs to go to the hospital, or a family member’s military deployment or return from deployment. Some unexpected absences will not qualify as an emergency include: staying home to meet the plumber or other tradesman, routine childcare of a younger child by the student, or opportunity to work an extra shift at afterschool job.
  4. Mandated court appearances (additional documentation required such as a police summons, a notice to appear, a subpoena, a signed note from a court official);
  5. The lack of transportation that is normally provided by a school other than the one the student attends (no parental documentation is required for this reason); or

6. Extraordinary educational opportunities pre-approved by district or school administrators and in accordance with Connecticut State Department of Education guidance must meet the following criteria: The opportunity must be educational in nature; it must have a learning objective related to the student’s course work or plan of study; it must be an opportunity not ordinarily available to the student; it must be grade and developmentally appropriate; and the content of the experience must be highly relevant to the student.

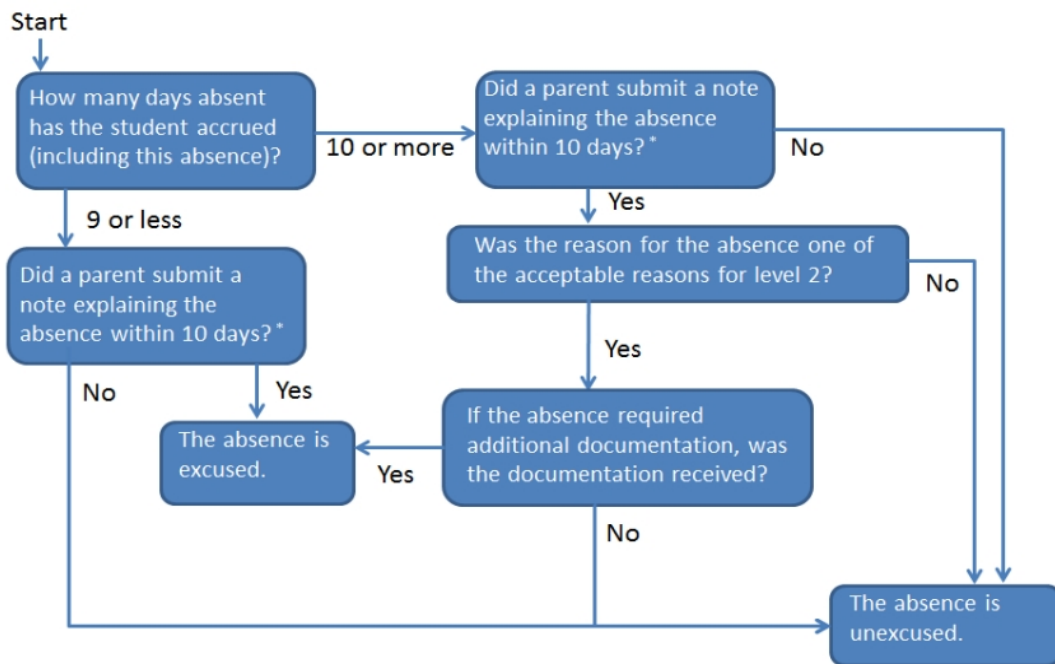
**2.1.2 Unexcused Absences**

A student’s absence from school shall be considered unexcused unless they meet one of the following criteria: The absence meets the definition for an excused absence (including documentation requirements); and the absence meets the definition of a disciplinary absence.

**2.1.3 Disciplinary Absences**

Absences that are the result of school or district disciplinary action are excluded from these definitions. It is important to note that while the first nine absences in a school year can be deemed excused for any reason the parent or guardian provides, the 10<sup>th</sup> and each subsequent absence establish a more stringent and specific set of reasons for the absence to qualify as excused. The figure 2 offers a visual tool to help determine if an absence is excused or unexcused. In cases where a student’s extended absence crosses levels, the rules should be applied as if there were two separate absences, one under Level 1 and the other under Level 2. For example, if a student is absent for five days on a family vacation and those absences represent numbers seven through 11, absences seven, eight, and nine would fall under Level 1 rules and can be accepted as excused; absences 10 and 11 would fall under Level 2 rules and would not be considered excused.

**Figure 2: The Decision Flow Chart Showing the Excused or Unexcused Absence**



Source: Adopted from the State Board of Education, April 2013

## **2.2 Causes of Students' Absenteeism in Secondary Schools**

Periodic studies and anecdotal observations in many countries show that 'enrolled' students are frequently not in schools. These are sometimes caused by the following factors:

Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) assert illness as the major cause of student absenteeism in secondary schools. Annual colds, flu, and assorted other childhood ailments clearly contribute to school absenteeism, but they are not the genesis of chronic absenteeism. In their most recent federal survey, whose results indicate fewer than 6 percent of children miss more than 11 days due to illness or injury. The authors further state that, acute health conditions are fortunately rare, and there are few chronic conditions that cannot be appropriately managed to enable school attendance. In practice, however, particularly in high-poverty areas, the medical care needed to enable students with chronic conditions, such as asthma, to attend school regularly are not always available at the scale and intensity required, (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). This study agrees with Ubogu as cited by Shahzada, et al., (2011); whose findings identify illness, permitted leave, voluntary absenteeism, as the common forms/causes of absenteeism. In addition, Mervilde, (1981) also reveals that; family health or financial concerns, poor school environment, drug and alcohol use, transportation problems, and differing community attitudes towards education are all conditions that can cause a child not to attend school. This kind of situation is not conducive for a child study. Therefore, the concern of this study is to establish whether students' absenteeism is attributed to the same factor or not and find its percentage level in Uganda.

In addition, Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) says; family obligations also make some students not go to school. As children enter early adolescence, family responsibilities can keep them from school. In high poverty environments, young adolescent girls sometimes provide emergency day care for younger siblings or are responsible for getting younger children to school. This rhyme well with Wadesango, et al., (2011) study which found that; students experience absenteeism that has a socio-economic character which makes them to seek for part-time employment, general upkeep, tuition fees, and renting fees instead of applying themselves fully to their studies. Plank, et al, as cited by Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) adds that; there is a growing evidence of even young adolescents taking on elder care responsibilities in single parent, multi generational households. Adolescents, moreover, are sometimes pulled into helping with the family business or working to enable family or personal survival. In other cases, they are compelled or lured into illegal activities. Students who become involved in the juvenile justice system then often miss additional days of schools while being detained, going to court, and transitioning back into school. It is against this background that, this empirical study is sought to investigate the main family obligations deterring students from attending classes regularly in USE schools in Uganda.

Williams, (2000) mentions that; schools, their curricula, and the strength of sanctions against chronic absenteeism are also contributing causes to students' absenteeism in schools. Kilpatrick, 1996; Lotz & Lee, 1999; Khazzaka, 1997, assert that; lack of challenging/interesting course work and curriculum are also reasons for student non-attendance. In support, Fleming, (1995) study, alludes that, the major reasons given by students for non-attendance at lessons were poor teaching (23%), timing of the lesson (23%) and poor quality of the lesson content (9%). Teasley, (2004) also asserts that students that have poor or conflicting relationships with teachers will avoid school in order to avoid their teachers. Thus, this research study is therefore concerned to find the percentage level of the teacher cause factor of student absenteeism in Uganda.

In another study by Lotz, et al and Dryburgh as cited by Williams, (2000), addressing truancy behavior, the researcher reveals the desire to participate in hedonistic activities and socialization with peers away from school provide other explanations for high absenteeism. Wadesango, et al., (2011) also alludes that, the motivation for their absenteeism from classes was the need to be with their friends and peers. Furthermore, Reid, (2005) asserts that, truant individuals are influenced by their peers not to attend school and encourage peers to engage in activities outside of the school with them. It is hoped that the findings of the present study will determine the level of peers influence on absenteeism from school.

According to Unger et al, (1997), students who participate in co-operative work experiences actually have a higher rate of absenteeism. While the cause for this occurrence is not conclusive, the researchers point out two possible explanations that is: students who already exhibit absenteeism might be attracted to the programs in order to leave school and thus have more days of non-attendance; and students in co-operative programs might disassociate themselves more from the school setting since they are experiencing the world of work, and older students who participate may have access to their own transportation and find it easier to be absent. This finding is in agreement with Wadesango, et al., (2011) who further states that; students attendance are sometimes affected as they had to fulfill their work related obligations and provides for their needs since they are from poor family background. Therefore, this research is sought to bring conclusion on how co-operative work causes student absenteeism in Uganda.

Furthermore, students absent themselves because of factors ranging from poor teaching styles by teachers, boring teachers, lessons being too long, and the teacher shows favoritism to certain students as critical lecturer characteristics that predispose them towards absenteeism or non-attendance, as suggested by Wadesango, et al., (2011). These findings are consistent with findings made by Williams, (1999) and Weller, (1996) in respect of education in Britain. Their studies revealed that demeaning teacher attitudes often lead to school avoidance by students. Wadesango, et al., (2011) says, many students do not attend core learning sessions due to other pressing study related activities that they will be doing. The authors mentioned several activities that are having a bearing on students' non-attendance for lectures, chief among them; being the need to work on assignments, completing assigned projects, researching in the library, preparing for presentations and studying for pending tests. Therefore, much as they may like to attend their lectures or related learning sessions, they end up not able to do so due to competing educational issues that demand attention. However, Durden & Ellis, (2003) found that class attendance and motivation were related; and they notes that if motivation is not controlled for, the effect of absence from class on performance may be overstated.

Shahzada, et al., (2011) argued that; harsh school rules and regulations could cause absenteeism that is; corporal punishment, families where students prepare themselves for school and parent to work. In addition, in an article by Clea McNeely and colleagues in the *Journal of School Health* (2004), the Add Health study found that when schools have harsh or punitive discipline policies, students feel less connected to school. However, it was unclear whether the more restrictive school policies are a response to a high number of disconnected students and their behavior problems, or whether punitive discipline policies alienate students from school. Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) study also reveals that, students who are forced to leave school, either through suspension, expulsion, or being sent to an alternative school, are not likely to increase their connectedness to or engagement with



school. The research study therefore, assessed the extent to which harsh school rules and regulations could cause absenteeism in schools.

Lotz & Lee, (1999), asserts that, mostly of the adolescents today receive less supervision than in the past. The contributing factors to chronic absenteeism involve parental and school-based responsibility. In many cases, parents actually condone the absence by ignoring excuses when no valid reason is apparent for their children's absence from school, Kilpatrick, (1996); Stickney & Miltenberger, (1996). In contrary, Williams, (1999) says, forcing older students to remain in school when they are not motivated will only increase their absenteeism.

Others avoid school for lack of clean or appropriate clothes, Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012). Sometimes it is rain, snow or cold combined with the lack of the necessary clothing, especially for students who take public transportation with multiple connections. Balfanz & Byrnes, further stipulates that; poor planning, family needs, or unpredictable transportation lead to students being late and they stay away from school altogether to avoid the hassle and sometimes the sanctions associated with tardiness. King & Bernstein, (2001) points out that, students' psychological traits have an enormous influence over their daily decisions regarding whether to attend or skip school. Since this findings was from other countries, it prompted the researcher to conduct a similar study in Uganda to investigate whether what has been said by the above authors are really the contributing factors to students absenteeism in USE schools in Uganda.

According to Enomoto, (1997), when students perceive that teachers do not care enough to follow up on absences, their motivation for attendance is not high. Lotz & Lee, (1999) corroborates; students negative self-image and low self-esteem as reasons for non-attendance. In addition, Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) postulates that, students choose not to attend, either because they or their parents or guardian do not see the value in school attendance or they have something else they would rather be doing; they have the agency and ability to skip school to do it since they are not being deterred by anything specific. Chang & Romero, (2008) research findings elaborate that, choosing not to attend school on a regular basis begins early in a child's formal education when some parents do not yet see the importance of their child being in school every day. For others, it takes a while to establish a family routine that enables regular school attendance. By conducting this study, the researcher is set to find out interest from parents or guardian is the one causing them absent themselves.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This section presents the methodology that was used to conduct the study. Descriptive cross sectional survey, which is concerned with describing the characteristics of an event, community or region, providing data about the population or item being studied by only describing the who, what, how, when and where of a situation at a given time and providing a systematic description that is as factual and as accurate as possible, Amin, (2005). The study also employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches/methods. A quantitative approach was adopted in order to allow the researcher to gather more precise and quantifiable information on the causes and effects of absenteeism whilst the qualitative methodology was also appropriate to this study because it allowed the researchers to get the data directly from the subjects themselves by sitting with the respondents and hear their views, voices, perceptions and expectations in detail. Thus, the researcher recognized several nuances of attitude and behavior that could escape researchers using other methods.

### 3.1 The Population and Sample Size

The population for this study was one thousand (1000) drawn from 17 out of 36 USE schools in the four districts of Serere, Ngora, Soroti and Kumi comprised of 07, 04, 03 and 03 USE schools respectively all are located in North Eastern Uganda. The study covered a sample of 278 respondents drawn from the population; this is consistent with Krejcie & Morgan, (1970) sample size determination criteria. The study used both purposive and stratified sampling to select the sample. The main instrument that was used to solicit for information was the questionnaire. Self-administered questionnaires with open-ended and closed questions were used for data collection. Research Assistant was used to distribute the questionnaires. The number of returned questionnaires was 226 giving a response rate at (81.3%). Interviews were also held with some of the students, District Education Offers, Political and CSOs leaders, Teachers and parents. Through the use of interviews, the interviewer was able to elaborate on issues and questions as well as clarifying the meaning of statements, answers or questions that may not have been clear to the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because the researchers wanted the respondents to give their detailed views, opinions and perceptions with regard to causes and effects of student absenteeism. The field data was statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics and narrative summary analyses. Furthermore, in this study; confidentiality ethic was adhered by using secret codes for all interview transcripts and identity of the participants were concealed. The research was therefore conducted with respect and concern for the dignity and welfare of the informants.

### 4.0 Results and Discussions of the Findings

This section presents the results of the findings using a statistical table.

#### 4.1 Causes of Students' Absenteeism in USE Schools in Uganda

The study shows that, the causes of students' absenteeism in Universal Secondary Education (USE) Schools in Uganda are unexcused absences which is responsible for 64.3% of the total students' absenteeism in the school while 35.5% are excused and they include: Lack of scholastic requirements, illness or disease, loss of parent or close relative, taking care of the sick, and bad weather as shown in Figure 3. This implies that the 64.3% are the student/parent/government factors which need to be addressed. Therefore, the government authorities should work with the donors, teachers, CSOs, business community and the media to sensitize parents on the importance of education and the need for student attendance.

**Figure 3: Causes of Students' Absenteeism in USE Schools in Uganda**

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Rank Order
Lack of scholastic requirements e.g. fees, uniforms, books, pens, etc.	158	20.7%	1 <sup>st</sup>
Household work like; farming, fetching water, construction, cooking	94	12.4%	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Lack of interest in Education by both the student and parent	74	9.7%	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Hunger at school/Lack of mid-day meals	68	8.9%	4 <sup>th</sup>
Sexual harassment at school	60	7.9%	5 <sup>th</sup>
Long distance to school	58	7.6%	6 <sup>th</sup>
Illness or Disease	57	7.5%	7 <sup>th</sup>
Loss of parent or close relative	49	6.4%	8 <sup>th</sup>
Peer influence	39	5.1%	9 <sup>th</sup>
Harsh punishment at school	35	4.6%	10 <sup>th</sup>

Poor performance in class	32	4.2%	11 <sup>th</sup>
Teacher factor i.e. teacher absenteeism, qualification, teaching skills	22	2.9%	12 <sup>th</sup>
Taking care of the sick	12	1.6%	13 <sup>th</sup>
Bad weather	06	0.8%	14 <sup>th</sup>
Weak policy on absenteeism	05	0.7%	15 <sup>th</sup>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>---</b>

*Source: Derived from Primary Data Analysis of Instrument; April, 2014*

### **Lack of Scholastic Materials/Requirements**

The study findings show that 20.7% of the students absent themselves because they lack scholastic requirements/materials such as; books, pens, uniforms, calculators, and additional fees contribution like; field work fee, school bus contribution, and PTA (Development Fund). These extra fees are a barrier to students' attendance. During the study, the researcher found that in Kumi district year 2013; three quarters (75%) of the students were sent home in one of the schools at the district for not paying development fund/ PTA contribution for the bus. In an interview with a parent in Kumi district says; *"The Bus contribution was agreed by parents in the meeting which was attended by different district leaders. Those whose children are parading to police, RDCs office are wasting their time because the decision was made before the introduction of USE programme ..."* Contributing to the same debate, one parent had this to say in Serere District; *"Additional school fees can be a problem because some of us are peasants and when it is not the season of harvesting we fail to raise money for scholastic materials and fees. Moreover in the village they make us pay a lot. So the USE program is not helping us."* In addition, another female parent in Ngora district lamented that; *"Despite the abolition of school fees, other fees are too high as compared to school fees for instance the price of school uniform is between Ush. 85,000-135,000 and yet the same can be got from the market at less than Ush. 50,000."* This implies that parents are feeling the pinch in the amount charged by schools uniform and development fund as a burden. This finding agrees with Mervilde, (1981) whose study also reveals that; family health or financial concerns are all conditions that can cause a child not to attend school.

### **Household work**

From figure 3 it is evident that household work contributes to 12.4% of the student absenteeism in the USE schools in Uganda. Students who are homeless and staying with friends, relatives are more absent from school than those staying with their biological parents for instance in rural areas; they have to wake up very early in the morning and go to the garden, fetch enough water for use, teeter animals (cattle, goats, pigs), then prepare for school depending on the time the task is accomplished and sometimes are told to remain to do the construction work. While urban students have tasks of washing utensils, mopping the house and preparing breakfast for family before leaving for school. According to the one of the Education Officer in Soroti district explained that; *"Agriculture is the back-bone of the peasant economy, and during the rainy season all efforts are geared towards food production for survival."* This was supported by a one member from Kyere Citizen Parliament (KCP) in Serere district said; *"Some students are heading families and therefore, at most times they have to fulfill family needs before going to school."* In addition a Student from Serere district also added that; *"At least every Friday I have to be out of school by going to fishing to earn some money to cater for my breakfast, lunch, and personal requirements like exercise books, pens, calculators, school uniforms, shoes as my parents pay for fees."* These reasons are critical because it will lead to poor performance in class, drop out and waste of government fund and as a result it will affect

the government objectives of increasing access to quality secondary education. Thus, study conforms partly to Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) because they mentioned that family obligations make some students not go to school without mentioning the reasons and level of prevalence in their study.

### **Lack of interest in Education**

This was ranked third with a total percentage of 9.7 as thought by the respondents during the study. The respondents urged that students with unexcused absenteeism have no interest in being at school since their parents also do support. In an interview with a Senior Education Assistant in Ngora district she explains that; *“There are clans /families who do not value education and they enjoy staying with their children together at home regardless of their behavior. Some parents don’t asked their children why they are absent from school even if they have paid all the school fees, development fees, provided the child with all the scholastics materials; a bicycle for transport and lunch in the restaurant and such children still keep of school and no question about it.”* In a similar interview in Serere district another Female teacher that; *“The problem is not only to the clan/family but it is hereditary. I margin, some students even divert their fees for procuring mobile phone, radio, latest fashioned clothes, sports betting, watching videos/football, internet, playing pool, cards, drinking; and when sent home by school administration for fees, they end up hiding in their rental rooms. At worse, some parents do not visit these children in their rental places, to find out whether the child is at school or not, and do not ask for the report card, circular letter(s) at the end of the term for accountability from the child.”* In the time of this study, one male parent was embarrassed by the daughter he rented the room; on his visitation to the daughter, he met a mature man coming out of the daughters’ rental room with a towel; when he called the daughter to come out, she could not and as a result he turned his bicycle back home with total shame to the extent he could not call for help from neighbor, Local council or police. Contributing to the same debate, the senior officer from the Public Affairs Centre of Uganda a leading CSO in Teso and Karamoja region had this to say in relation to lack of interest in education; *“The society has collapsed. In old days, a child was the property of the clan; and discipline was a society’s role but today a relative or close friend can see a child/student being taken to the lodge will not act. Why? Immediately you take action to discipline the child, in a fewest hours you will find yourself in probation office or police cell for violating the child’s right to freedom.”* He added that parents do not focus on long term vision but they tell their children that, *“My role is to give you education, other things it is up to you.”* That is why even the learners are not focused because they do not know why they are at school. For instance, some parents find the solution of dealing with the stubborn child as taking him/her to school; and as a result the child will be at school with no goal but thinking of the holidays. This finding is in agreement with that of Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) which states that, students choose not to attend, either because they or their parents or guardian do not see the value in school.

### **Hunger at school**

Hunger at school was ranked fourth as one of the cause of students’ absenteeism in USE schools. This implies that 8.9% of the total absenteeism in a school is caused by hunger or lack of mid-day meals. This is because some families are trapped with poverty and have no income to pay for meals at school, or a student(s) did not have a decent super/meals hence making the body weak and as a result a student can’t work or go to school because of the long time s/he will be at school on empty stomach and yet class needs concentration. According to one of the Female teacher in Kumi district

she decried that; *“Hunger does not only affect the student, even teachers. She added that afternoon lessons are not always effective you find a hungry teacher is teaching hungry students.”* As a result, the students end up not understanding the lesson because of ineffective teaching hence will fail in the examinations. In Wadesango, et al., (2011) study which found that; students experience absenteeism that has a socio-economic character such as poverty, hunger which makes them to seek for part-time employment instead of applying themselves fully to their studies.

### **Sexual harassment at school**

Sexual harassment was ranking fifth (7.9%) in the four districts in the ratio of 4:3:3:1 for Kumi, Serere, Soroti and Ngora district respectively. This implies that the school is not a safe place for children anymore; teachers' student relationship is very high. In the sampled schools, students emphasized that at least there are two or more teachers having sexual relations with students they teach. On probing why? They said, *“These older men lure young girls into sexual relations with money, leaking examinations for them, food or other favours like perfumes, mobile phones for communication, pads, and outings.”* In an interview with a mother of two daughters in secondary school in Soroti district she narrated that; *“Yah, our children are sexually abused by those teachers who do not hold professional code of conduct and respect for their wives. They have turned their guns on the young girls whom they should be calling their daughters.”* This kind of character does not motivate students to attend classes conducted by such incredible teacher(s), which demean the school and its leadership; while putting the students' health, life and future in jeopardy because of the likely complications such as; HIV/AIDS infections, pregnancies which sometimes the girl(s) is/are lured to abort forgetting of the complications associated with abortion such as; loss of weight, death, barrenness, and later rejection from man/family members. It is important to note that, this is the first empirical study which established sexual harassment in schools as one of the top five causes of students' absenteeism in Uganda accounting to 7.9% of the total absenteeism among female students. This finding conform with Teasley, (2004) who asserts that; students that have poor or conflicting relationships with teachers will avoid school in order to avoid their teachers.

### **Long distance to school**

Despite the increased number of secondary schools both government and private implementing USE programme for instance from 1,647(904 government; 743 private) in 2012 to 1,919(1,024 government and 879 private) in 2013 long distance to school is still a challenge to students accounting to 7.6% of students' absenteeism. Some students still cover eight (8) Kilo-meters daily on foot to reach their schools for instance in one of the sub-counties in Serere District, all the three (3) secondary schools in the sub-county are located in one parish with two implementing USE programme having three primary schools while the rest of the seven (7) parishes have eleven government primary schools with no single secondary school. These challenges generated mixed results from the schools and parents that were visited. Some teachers, politicians and parents were of the view that; *“... Students move very long distance to school, which makes them tired. It takes long for them to settle in class and they may not concentrate on school attendance. They also frequently move outside the class due to hunger, tiredness. The government should do something about the situation.”* Even if they access the school, their performance is affected by the time they spend in the morning and evening travelling to and from school. Contributing to the same debate, one of the teachers emphasised that; *“Although my child has no problem with the distance to the school because we live close to the school, distance to school is a big issue as far as school attendance is concerned for those who come from far. Students reach school tired and the*

concentration is low. When it rains the problem gets much worse. Some students may not be able to go to school because they can't withstand rain. Girls specifically get disturbed regularly by idle men." This situation was also revealed by Mbozi, (2008) in her findings. The author stated that some learners covered up to ten (10) kilometers walking to school. This made them too tired to concentrate in class. They equally learnt few subjects each day because they most of the times reached school late which made them perform poorly at school.

### **Illness or Disease**

During the study, the most illness/diseases being mentioned by the respondents were; girl's menstruation period, HIV/AIDS, malaria, flu and cough, asthma, sickle cell, snake bites, and epilepsy was ranked seventh representing (7.5%) as one of the causes of students' absenteeism in USE schools. According to the Education Minister in 2012 she said in her report that, "*The HIV/AIDS prevalence in both teachers and students is still looming and is considered to be one of the causes that are contributing to raising dropout rates, absenteeism, repetition and poor performance.*" New Vision, Friday, July 06, 2012. This finding is in agreement with the study conducted by Balfanz & Byrnes, (2012) and Ubogu, (2004) who identifies illness, permitted leave, voluntary absenteeism, as the common causes of absenteeism.

### **Loss of Parent or Close Relative**

This was ranked eighth and contributes to 6.4% of the total absenteeism in the school. In one of the schools in Kumi district, the school lost nine (9) of its members between January and August, 2014 (that is teaching staff, supportive staff, PTA member and a student who drown in the lake). This is a very disastrous situation with serious psychological and emotional effects which leads to; lose of moral in teaching, backlog due to the un covered lessons, poor performance, misuse of school resources for instance money and furniture, and running short of teachers which will lead to urgent recruitment of part-time teacher which sometimes may not fit in the shoes of the diseased or become rigid to adjust on the time table and this, makes the problem un answered.

### **Peer Influence**

Peer influence was ranked 9<sup>th</sup> accounting for 5.1% of the total absenteeism in the school/class. As the saying goes that; "*Birds of the same feather do flock together.*" Similarly students with low ambitions and interest tend to dodge going to school and remain drinking, watching video, sport betting, prostitution/ trading for sex as a way of making money earlier and looking at studying as a waste of time. Some have been influenced by promises of getting better jobs/scholarships and ended up being trafficked in sexual or forced labour. The Head of Department in one of the schools in Kumi District urged that; "*Female students are left to rent alone, given less attention and they can decide whether to come to school or not and more so, they try to catch up with the urban life.*" In support Wadesango, et al., (2011) studies also found that, the motivation for their absenteeism from classes was the need to be with their friends and peers which equally rhythms with, Reid, (2005) whose findings reveals that; truant individuals are influenced by their peers to not attend school and encourage peers to engage in activities outside of the school with them.

### **Harsh Punishment at School**

From the findings, the researcher found harsh punishment as the tenth (4.6%) causes of students' absenteeism in USE schools in Uganda. The practice is still done in many schools especially in rural areas in the four (4) districts still practice corporal punishment. According to students, they urged

that, some teachers do not listen to students' reason of coming late even if a student has a genuine reason, the only answer is "*late is late*" go down and you are canned the way s/he wishes and, or given to clean the school compound for two/three hours; dig the ant hill till you remove the Quill, and as a result a student will opt to stay away from school on those days when they are very late. This result rhythm well with Shahzada, et al., (2011) who admit that corporal punishment could cause absenteeism in school.

### **Poor Performance in Class**

Poor performance in class causes 4.2% of students' absenteeism as thought by the respondents and it was ranked eleventh among the causes in schools. The could be as a result of lack; lack of motivation, poor learning environment, dislike of school, having no aspirations, poor family educational back-ground, inadequate learning materials, age and large classes. According to Lotz & Lee, (1999); students' negative self-image and low self-esteem are reasons for non-attendance which supports the findings.

### **Teacher Factor**

The study also reveals that teacher factor such as; teacher absenteeism, qualification, and teaching skills attributes to 2.9% of the total absenteeism and ranked twelfth among the causes of students' absenteeism in schools. Schools with low quality/standard have more absenteeism rate as compared to schools with high standard. This is attributed by both teachers and students factor for instance, schools with low standards do not mind about student coming late in class, being out of school, and as a result a student will attend and leave school at the time s/he wishes. This was cited in rural schools in all the districts surveyed. One parent Serere District emphasized that; "*There are schools which have failed to pass students in first grade for more than three years and they celebrate second grade as the best in National Examinations.*" This case is different from urban and peri-urban schools, since most of them have got gates; and if a student enters, s/he will come out at the time the gate is re-opened or when the student has been granted permission to move out; however late comers will remain out till lunch time (1:00pm Ugandan time). According to Kilpatrick, 1996 Lotz & Lee, 1999; Khazzaka, 1997, supports that; lack of challenging/ interesting course work and curriculum were reasons for student non-attendance while on the other hand Fleming, (1995) study, alludes that, the major reasons given by students for non-attendance at lessons were; poor teaching, timing of the lesson and poor quality of the lesson content. Other causes of students' absenteeism were; taking care of the sick, bad weather and weak policy on absenteeism which were ranked 13<sup>th</sup> (2.9%), 14<sup>th</sup> (1.6%) and 15<sup>th</sup> (0.7%) respectively.

### **5.0 Conclusion**

Students' absenteeism is real in USE schools and its causes should not be looked at lightly; early intervention in regards to attendance will make a difference for those students who are moving towards disengagement from school and as a result the begin practicing social evil in the society. Therefore, it is very important for the government, policy makers, school administrators, media, parents, and the general public to accurately monitor, identify early and intervene about this silent killer. The silent killer has long term effects to the student(s) and the nation, that is: leads to school dropout hence a blockage of students academic growth; poor performance in examinations due to low syllabi coverage; a waste of tax payers money; deteriorating performance which mounts to open criticism hence making the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government un popular with its own initiative; leads to increase in crimes because of being attracted to the outside

environment full of bad elements practicing activities such as; drug abuse, gambling (playing cards, sports betting, pick pocketing), commercial sex, fornication leading to early marriages and HIV/AIDS risks which is a result of perceiving being at school as academic punishment. In addition, they become a burden to the society because of unemployment since one has no employable skills and it will also spoil the reputation of the school because of failure rate which makes students to transfer to another school with better academic performance. The empirical study also shows that; the average rate of students' absenteeism is 23.18% in day schools as compared to 3.25% in boarding schools. The mainly affected categories include; children from poor families, children living far from school, female students, orphans, disables, male students, and children living with one parent which could be a result of divorced or separation or death as thought by the respondents during the study. From the data analysis, the ratio of male to female students' absenteeism is 1:3 in the studied districts in Uganda.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

Attendance is a key driver of the nation's achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment. Thus, as a nation we must act, to ensure that our students are ready, willing and able to attend school every day. Their future, and hence our future, depends on it. It is against this background that the researcher offers the following practical and policy recommendations for the improvement of students' absenteeism in secondary schools:

The government through the MoES should make sure that parents understand their responsibility of contributing towards the development of the school and their children through paying required development fees which is always agreed by themselves in the Parent and Teachers' Association (PTA) meeting. This will ease the management of school than confusing parents that; USE is free and no child should be sent out for non-payment and yet the contribution by the government is little that is; the government pays the schools an annual grant of up to Ush. 123,000 for each student under the programme in government aided schools while Ush. 141,000 for students in private schools under Public Private Partnership (PPP) spread over three school terms. It is also important to note that, the government consideration of increasing the fees for each student in government aided school under USE from shillings 41,000 to 58,000 and from 47,000 to 70,000 for private schools this still does not cover the scholastics materials and parents still have to contribute towards schools development by paying PTA fees hence, politics should be separated from education if quality education is to be realized in Uganda.

Furthermore, since the majority of parents are still pinched with the costs of scholastics and the PTA contributions, the researcher recommends the government to subsidize taxes on the scholastics materials such as books, pens, calculators, and school uniforms or provide them free by consolidating it in the grant since the majority of the parent are peasant who cannot even afford two meals a day and giving money for books, pens, calculators, mathematical sets is like wasting money and yet there are other pressing needs like food, medical, and weeding the gardens. Thus, this initiative will enhance the enrollment while at the same time increasing on retention of students in school since parents will be left with a mandatory task of providing meals. This initiative will also reduce on the "ghosts" schools and students.

Government should improve the household income of the citizens through effective appropriate implementations of its poverty alleviation programmes like the National Agricultural Advisory



Services, Youth Livelihood Programme, Skilling Uganda and SACCOs by targeting parents/guardians whose children are in the USE schools. This will improve on the income levels of the household and as a result it will enable parents obtain what to sell so as to pay fees, and obtain the scholastics materials. To students who are bread earners in the family, the researcher recommends that; the government, community, CSOs, development agencies and well to do individuals should provide assistance to such students in form of food, clothing, books and required to enabled them achieve their dreams.

Remember that, hunger does not cause only absenteeism but drop out as well. Therefore, the researcher recommends the government and development partners to support school feeding programme in the last ten districts with low attendance and performance in national examinations while giving priority to public/government aided schools but not private schools even if it is under PPP. In this, the community will be tasked to provide firewood, water, the cooking utensils, a service of a cook, shelter as a way of monitoring the programmes implementation and this will foster accountability and transparency while weekly report should be submitted to the MoES for verification and next terms planning. Thus, programme will help to increase students' enrolment, access and retention to school which the government has failed to meet in the last six years of the programme implementation making student repetition and drop out at about 10% which is high while student absenteeism is at 23.2% the number described by State Board of Education (2013) severe or chronic and need to be addressed.

The government through the Ministry of Education and Sports should not ignore the community and students' out cry on the increasing rate of teacher students' sexual relationship in the USE schools. This kind of conduct could be the way of undermining the USE policy; on the other hand could lead to early pregnancies among female students hence dropping out of the programme/and transferring of student by parents to private schools hence leaving the programme being abused.

For a meantime, the government should continue with its programme of constructing seed schools in rural sub counties taking Olio, Labor and Atiira sub counties in Serere district which has no single USE school and at worse; Olio and Labor Sub Counties in Serere, Kumi sub-county in Kumi, Gweri in Soroti, and Ngora sub-county in Ngora district has no single secondary school. These will reduce congestion of students in class and will enhance effective teaching and learning; reduce on the absenteeism level because of distance; save students from harassments by preys/vultures ("Boda bodas," businessmen, drunkards and rapists) on their way; limiting the chance of dropping out after primary level; and above all it will increases access to free basic education to more learners hence achieving the Education for All (EFA) targets. However, the most workable approach of addressing the problem of long distance would be introduction of Open Schooling System in Uganda. The system refers to "the physical separation of the school level learner from the teacher, and the use of unconventional teaching methodologies, and information and communications technologies to bridge the separation and provide the education and training." The system has already been practiced in countries with access problems like South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana among other African countries. The system is found to be more economical because it cuts the cost of recruiting too many teachers, supervision, constructions drastically; provide opportunities to the school leavers, dropouts, working adults, housewives, and learners from distance and remote areas; and reach out to those who could not complete/continue their schooling due to socio-cultural and economic reasons.

The research also recommends that; schools be held accountable for improving attendance. For instance, attendance and chronic absence rates should be publicly availed and reported to the District Education Officer. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Sports should work with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), district education stakeholders and state agencies like the Residential District Commissioners (RDCs), District Internal Security Officers (DISOs), and Gombolola Internal Security Officers (GISOs) to collect weekly student level attendance data. This will help to reduce on the “ghost” students, schools and teachers due to routine monitoring hence saving the tax payers money instead of remitting 100% of the total funds for the students and yet students in attendance are 80%. Thus, through this routine report will enabled the MoES to establish the actual student data instead of rallying on estimates where head teachers inflate students number in order to get more funds from the government.

Due to lack of interest, there is need to improve in teaching methods for instance, if instruction is imparted by means of modern methods and techniques keeping in view the interests, and needs of the students there is no reasons why there will not be any improvement in the attitude of the students toward studies and the school and their attendance. The old methods of lecturing, subjecting the students to arduous exercises and meaningless drill and memorizing of useless items of instruction have no place in the modern school because instead of attracting the students such methods repel them from the school environment. Motivation of students through field-trips, the use of films, film-strips, records, television, radio and any other audiovisual aids should at least now be realized by our teachers. In addition, the school building, furniture, facilities of co-curricular activities, adequate libraries and reading rooms, clean and healthy environment do play an important role in attracting the students. With all these facilities and attractions the school will become a place of interest rather than of aversion.

The government, Ministry of Education and Sports, policy makers, practitioners, parents and students need to carry out their respective roles accordingly. For instance, the government should improve teachers working conditions so as to boost their motivation with a view that this will have positive returns in the way they discharge their duties; The district officials and head teachers be trained in Total Quality Management (TQM) skills; thus, the quality assurance schemes will make teachers accountable for what they are doing and as a result it will lead to clear improvement of the programmes judged negatively; Board of Governors (BOG) should approve the policies contributing to school improvements and facilitate the implementation of such policies; PTA provides financial assistance where need; Teachers should also meet their targets as teachers by making learning more realistic; Also parents should inspire children to have interest in education likewise children should also dance to their tune.

The researcher also recommends the MoES, District officials (District Education Officer and the team; District Health Team), and school administrators to create school environment friendly to the sick such as; students with HIV/AIDS, asthma, sickle cell, epilepsy, flu, and girls in their menstrual period by showing concern and abundant love instead of discriminating. For instance, the health team should provide information to students about asthma, its effect on student attendance, and provide strategies to help student(s) learn to better manage the disease (asthma); reducing the transmission of common illnesses like flu and cough through provision of hand washing facilities like water tape, tape jerrican and improving the quality of school; the government should extent the services of SNV of skilling pupils in making sanitary pads to curb female pupils’ absenteeism from

school during menstrual periods to secondary schools since many adolescent girls are in secondary; the target should be in rural districts in the country; above all the government should scrapped off taxes on materials like refined cotton, towels and already made pads to increase access to the sanitary towels by rural girls/women. Finally, physical check-up must be carried out as many times in a year as possible for students and staff.

### 5.3 Areas Recommended for Further Research

The following are the areas the researcher has seen prudent for the future research:

- ✓ The relationship between the District Education Officers and Secondary Schools Administration;
- ✓ Teacher qualification and students' academic performance; and
- ✓ Effects of students' absenteeism on students' academic/school performance

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