

Dear parents, brace yourselves for yet another long school holiday

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Children at a playground after closing school for holiday. PHOTO | FILE

As if the 10-month Covid-19 break last year wasn't stressful enough for parents, they have to brace themselves for yet another long holiday period as schools close this week.

Across the nation, guardians are steeling themselves for the drama awaiting them when they return home in the evening to the hysterical chorus of "mum, dad... we're bored!"

Due to the unpleasant experiences of the last vacation, when many children went astray due to excessive freedom and peer pressure, the recess presents another headache on how to keep them occupied.

The learners have completed the second term of the 2020 academic year, which was 'lost' to the pandemic, and will stay away to allow for the administration and marking of national exams.

Only candidates sitting the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams will remain in school. The marking will be done from April 19 to May 7.

Grade Four learners will have the longest holiday—18 weeks—while the rest will be out for seven weeks.

The pioneer competency-based curriculum (CBC) class currently undertaking an assessment will remain at home since they will complete their academic year this week, having opened school earlier than the rest in October, 2020.

Indiscipline in schools

Being a transition class, learners cannot report back while the last 8-4-4 cohort is still in Standard 5. It's the same script for KCPE candidates, who will join secondary school after 17 weeks as they cannot report to Form One until the current class transitions to Form Two in July.

Universities and other tertiary institutions have their independent calendars. Therefore, admission of Form Four leavers will depend on these.

Last year, estimates show thousands of teenage girls got pregnant, others were married off early while hundreds of learners dropped out of school due to child labour.

The Education ministry is yet to release official numbers on the crisis that attracted the attention of President Uhuru Kenyatta.

"Definitely, it is a concern. It is worrying as schools are the safest places for children," acting chair of the Kenya Primary Schools Heads Association, Johnson Nzioka, told Nation.

Since children will require close monitoring, he urged parents to exercise extra care to ensure they are out of harm's way.

The increase in drug and substance abuse among learners has been blamed for the rising cases of indiscipline in schools.

Long holiday

"I don't see any harm in them coming to school for private study and play together. They can also be engaged in co-curricular activities in the safety of schools," Mr Nzioka said.

Some schools have already started putting in place measures to keep the Grade Four children busy during their long holiday.

Parents at Makini School in Nairobi will, for instance, meet with the administration on Thursday to decide on a holiday programme for Grade Four or alternatives on how to keep them positively engaged.

Charity Muthoni, a parent from Meru County, said she had not yet come up with a plan for her son who is in Grade Four and is hoping his school will help out.

Apart from Grade Four, the other learners will open school on May 10 for a short third term that will take 10 weeks. They will close for a week on July 17 and open for the first term of the new academic year on July 26.

They will then close on October 1 for a week, the fourth term packed in one calendar year in a crash programme aimed at recovering lost time.

Next year will also have a congested programme, with the school calendar expected to normalise in January 2023.

Last year's loss

However, Dr Maina Gioko, a teacher and education expert, says the accelerated learning has been a failure so far and learners have not recovered from last year's loss.

"It's been messy and stressful. Pedagogically, it makes no sense," he told Nation, adding that the wellbeing of teachers was also not taken into account and that the rush to "cover the syllabus" will have pitfalls, which will be felt for a long time.

Dr Gioko, who is a teacher at Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa, said young learners lose six percent of their cognitive skills performance for every week of school lost while the older ones lose about one percent.

This, however, varies based on the experiences they go through at home.

He advised parents to invest in learning materials for their children.

“Make sure your child is gainfully occupied, make a schedule or buy them workbooks to work on their own,” said Dr Gioko.

National Parents Association chairman Nicholas Maiyo urged parents to be careful, having learnt from last year’s experiences.

The association will set guidelines for parents on how to support their children during the break.