

## **EASSO BRIEF | NUMBER 01**

**Title:** The Institutional Silo: System-Level Enforcement Gaps and Trust Breakdowns in Uganda's School Safeguarding Infrastructure

**Geographic Focus:** Uganda (Phase 1 Baseline)

**Primary Evidence Base:** 100 Qualitative Student Assessments (Ages 18-22) & Multi-Stakeholder Consultations

**Timeline of Inquiry:** May-June 2026

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### **1. Introduction**

The East Africa School Safeguarding Observatory (EASSO) is a youth-led research and accountability initiative focused on evaluating how child protection systems function within educational institutions across East Africa. By centering the primary perspectives of young people and frontline practitioners, EASSO works to identify and bridge the critical operational gaps between formal national safeguarding policies and the daily lived experiences of students.

This brief presents the emerging strategic findings from initial exploratory fieldwork conducted in Uganda. The purpose of this document is to codify consistent system-level patterns, contribute data-driven insights to ongoing regional discussions on school safety, and provide a clear baseline for structural child protection reforms.

### **2. Methodology and Scope**

This initial phase of inquiry relies on a qualitative, exploratory research design executed over a 30-day period to assess the operational health of institutional protection systems.

The primary data architecture consists of **10” semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 18-22**, focusing on their recent lived experiences within the Ugandan secondary education system. To ground these insights within the broader policy environment, secondary data was systematically gathered through a series of **virtual consultations (Zoom) with regional education and safeguarding stakeholders**. These expert witnesses included non-governmental organisation (NGO) practitioners, child protection program directors, and international professionals specialising in education systems strengthening.

The inquiry explicitly evaluated four core dimensions:

\* Student awareness, accessibility, and actual utilisation of institutional reporting channels.

- \* The baseline level of trust young people place in school-based protection mechanisms.
- \* Structural, social, and emotional barriers preventing the disclosure of abuse or harm.
- \* The consistency and transparency of institutional responses to active safeguarding concerns.

### **3. Key Strategic Findings**

#### **3.1 The Culture of Suppression and Victim-Blaming**

A dominant, cross-cutting pattern across the student cohort was a profound reluctance to report safeguarding violations due to the anticipation of adverse treatment. Rather than experiencing a supportive disclosure environment, a significant majority of participants expressed that students who come forward are routinely subjected to skepticism, interrogation, and overt victim-blaming by school authorities. This pervasive culture shifts the burden of proof onto the vulnerable party, transforming formal reporting channels into spaces of psychological risk rather than institutional safety.

#### **3.2 Fear of Retaliation and Social Costs**

The data demonstrates that silence is frequently evaluated by students as the safest strategic choice. Participants consistently articulated a rational fear of systemic retaliation following any disclosure of harm. This retaliation manifests through multiple vectors, including administrative punishment, targeted grading penalties, social exclusion, community stigma, and permanent damage to the student's reputation within the close-knit school ecosystem.

#### **3.3 Fractured Trust in Internal Safeguarding Authorities**

The operational efficacy of any safeguarding framework relies entirely on the relationship between the student body and designated protection staff. However, the study revealed a critical deficit in institutional trust. Students reported deep discomfort approaching teachers or appointed safeguarding officers due to weak relational bonds, a historical lack of confidentiality, and a perception that student grievances are not treated with appropriate gravity.

#### **3.4 The Structural Contradiction of Authority-Driven Harm**

A highly critical vulnerability identified in the fieldwork is the presence of harm, neglect, and active abuse originating directly from individuals in positions of institutional authority. When teachers, staff, or school administrators-the very actors legally mandated to manage the safeguarding pipeline-are identified as the perpetrators of harm, the internal reporting loop suffers an unresolvable conflict of interest. This structural contradiction completely neutralises internal reporting

mechanisms, leaving students with no viable or safe recourse within the school walls.

### **3.5 Weak Enforcement and Policy-to-Practice Gaps**

Consultations with civil society practitioners and system coordinators confirmed that while comprehensive safeguarding policies exist on paper at both institutional and ministerial levels, enforcement remains highly fragmented. Schools frequently satisfy the bureaucratic requirements of licensing by maintaining written policies, yet they lack the internal enforcement machinery, trained personnel, and independent oversight required to execute them. Consequently, formal tracking, rigorous follow-up, and standardised accountability systems are fundamentally underdeveloped.

### **3.6 Academic Prioritisation Over Student Well-being**

Both primary and secondary stakeholders highlighted a systemic misalignment of institutional incentives. School success across the region is overwhelmingly measured, marketed, and rewarded based on high-stakes academic performance metrics and examination results. Because school boards prioritise academic output above holistic student welfare, safeguarding interventions are routinely deprioritised, treated as administrative distractions, or managed through highly informal, undocumented channels.

### **3.7 Reputational Shielding and Systematic Under-Reporting**

A recurring structural insight from our expert consultations is that educational institutions treat safeguarding violations as existential threats to their commercial and social reputation. To protect their institutional branding, enrolment figures, and financial standing, schools frequently engage in "reputational management." This involves the deliberate under-reporting of critical incidents, the avoidance of formal documentation, and the enforcement of informal, internal resolutions designed to keep systemic failures hidden from regulatory bodies and the public.

## **4. Cross-Cutting System Insight**

When these themes are analysed collectively, an undeniable structural reality emerges:

**The primary failure within the educational child protection sector is not the absence of policy frameworks, but the severe breakdown between policy design and lived implementation.**

[National/Institutional Policy Design]

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▼ (Undermined by Reputational Shields & Academic Incentives)

[Enforcement Deficit]

|

▼ (Creates Hostile Reporting Environments)

[Student Disengagement due to Fear]

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▼

[Functional System Failure]

Safeguarding infrastructure in Uganda exists cosmetically in formal documentation, but its operational utility is entirely constrained by student fear, deep-seated mistrust of authorities, weak administrative enforcement, and institutional incentives that prioritise corporate reputation over child protection. Internal school-managed systems cannot effectively audit themselves when they are financially and reputationally incentivised to hide their failures.

## 5. Limitations

These preliminary findings are based on an initial exploratory sample size within Uganda and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all educational institutions across the wider East African region. This study represents the opening phase of a long-term, multi-country tracking initiative. Further scaled data collection, quantitative validation, and deeper regional cross-referencing remain ongoing.

## 6. Conclusion and the EASSO Mandate

The baseline evidence gathered over the past month proves that traditional, top-down, school-monitored child protection systems are failing to guarantee student safety. The persistent realities of reporting fears, compromised authorities, and institutional cover-ups require a fundamental shift in how the education sector approaches accountability.

This systemic gap defines the core mandate of the **East Africa School Safeguarding Observatory (EASSO)**. Internal mechanisms require independent, external, and data-driven oversight. EASSO is positioning itself to be that permanent, youth-led verification engine.

By expanding our structured data collection pipelines, refining our thematic analysis, and translating primary student testimonies into clear accountability indices, EASSO will provide international donors, civil society organisations, and national policymakers with the independent ground truth required to force transparent policy enforcement and build genuinely safe educational environments across East Africa.

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