



Year of wins for participants of the National Speech and Debate championships.

How 2025 redefined the teen experience

From policy decisions that reshaped student life to tragic losses that forced the nation to pause and ask hard questions about safety and care, 2025 stretched, tested and transformed the teenage experience.

BY PATRICK SSENTONGO

Every year leaves a footprint. Some years tiptoe quietly; others announce themselves loudly and refuse to be ignored. For a typical Ugandan teen, 2025 belonged firmly to the latter. It was a year of glittering attire and tightened rules, big dreams colliding with uncertainty, celebration sharing space with grief—and young people learning, sometimes painfully, how fragile and complex the school experience can be.

One moment, students were planning outfits, playlists and grand entrances; the next, they were grappling with policy shifts, academic uncertainty and



A swearing in ceremony for new prefects at Rainbow International School.

headlines no learner ever wants to read. The teenage years, once lived largely in the background, are now unfolding in real time; under public scrutiny, national reform and mounting social pressure. From red-carpet proms that felt like movie premieres to classrooms clouded by curriculum confusion. From policy decisions that reshaped student life to tragic losses that forced the nation to pause and ask hard questions about safety and care, 2025 stretched, tested and transformed the teenage experience. We look back at the moments that defined conversations in dormitories, classrooms, assemblies and homes across the country.

As usual, prom fever was on

If one event captured the imagination of students across schools this year, it was the prom. Proms were not just present; they were everywhere. For many schools, they stood out as the most anticipated event on the calendar—an emotional reward after years of routines, rules and revision.

Across the country, proms evolved into full-scale red-carpet experiences, complete with themed décor, dramatic en-



Busoga College Mwiri dudes pose for a photo before meeting their dates from Rubaga Girls School during their Sosh earlier this year. PHOTOS/PATRICK SSENTONGO

trances, photographers and carefully curated aesthetics. School halls, hotels and gardens were transformed into glamorous venues that, for one night, allowed students to step into a world far removed from timetables, uniforms and bell schedules.

A notable trend was the rise of holiday proms, increasingly adopted to give finalists uninterrupted time to celebrate. Away from tight academic calendars, looming deadlines and constant supervision, these proms offered breathing space; time to connect, reflect and simply be teens.

Fashion spoke loudly. Designer gowns, tailored tuxedos and statement accessories became the norm. Some outfits were sourced locally, while others were ordered online from global platforms, reflecting how international fashion culture continues to filter into the Ugandan school experience.

Parents, too, played an active role—often stretching financially to support what had become a once-in-a-lifetime milestone. This sparked quiet conversations about affordability, peer pressure and expectations, especially as proms grew more elaborate each year. Still, for many families, the joy and confidence on their children's faces made the sacrifice worthwhile.

Beyond the glamour, proms also became emotional closing chapters. For finalists, especially those in boarding schools, the event symbolised an ending—of friendships forged in dormitories, routines shaped by prep time, and

a shared journey soon to scatter classmates across universities, careers and countries. Laughter was often followed by tears, as students confronted the reality that this night marked their last collective memory within school walls. Teachers, too, quietly acknowledged the weight of the occasion. Some attended not as supervisors, but as witnesses—watching students they once disciplined now carry themselves with confidence and maturity. In this way, prom evolved beyond celebration; it became a rite of passage, affirming transition rather than excess.

Traditional rituals such as crowning prom kings and queens remained central, reinforcing the sense of occasion. Entertainment levels also rose, with several schools inviting popular local artists, turning school proms into mini concerts and blurring the line between student celebration and professional show business.

A-Level curriculum confusion

While proms brought colour and excitement, the academic side of 2025 was marked by uncertainty, particularly for Senior Five students.

Following the rollout of Uganda's competency-based curriculum at O-Level, the government announced plans to revise the A-Level syllabus to align with the new learning approach. The abridged A-Level curriculum aimed to remove outdated content, reduce overload and prioritise critical thinking and practical skills—while retaining all 29

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECH STILL RULE

Even as school policies tightened, digital life expanded. Screens, streams and status were very much apparent.

In 2025, social media continued to shape teen identity, trends and social capital. TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat remained dominant, dictating fashion, slang, music tastes and even prom aesthetics. Viral challenges, outfit reveals and "day in my school life" videos blurred boundaries between private school life and public consumption.

New phones, faster apps and AI-powered tools became part of everyday teen life. From smarter cameras for content creation to AI-assisted study apps, technology reshaped how teens learned, connected and expressed themselves.

Social media also began shaping school narratives. Incidents that once remained within school gates now spilled into public debate within hours. Voice notes, screenshots and videos circulated rapidly—often before official statements were issued. While this immediacy empowered students to speak out, it also exposed them to misinformation and online judgment.

Yet many teens used digital platforms positively—to advocate for school safety, share mental health resources and build supportive communities beyond physical classrooms. In 2025, the teen voice was not just louder; it was digitally amplified.

subjects.

However, when schools opened, many institutions had not received the revised syllabus. Teachers and students found themselves navigating lessons without clarity on what content to prioritise, how to teach it or how learners would be assessed.

In response, some schools reverted to the old curriculum, while others attempted to adjust mid-term. The lack of adequate teacher training compounded the problem, leaving educators expected to deliver a system they had not been fully oriented into.

Education authorities assured schools that the abridged curriculum would be accessed through official channels and that support would follow. For many students, however, the damage was already done. Anxiety set in early, with learners unsure of examination formats, subject depth and academic direction.

For students transitioning from the competency-based O-Level system, the confusion felt particularly unfair. After adapting to a skills-focused approach, they expected a smoother progression. Instead, many felt caught between two systems—uncertain whether they were pioneers of reform or casualties of rushed implementation. Senior Five became a year defined by questions without immediate answers.

Parents also struggled. Without clear guidance, they found it difficult to support their children academically, while teachers bore the pressure of delivering results under unclear conditions. The situation reignited debates about whether education reforms sufficiently prioritise learner readiness over policy ambition.

"Uncool" guidelines on entertainment, student leadership

Another defining shift of 2025 arrived quietly but left a lasting impact. New Ministry of Education guidelines on entertainment, co-curricular activities and student leadership significantly reshaped school life.

What was framed as a move to restore discipline was, for many students, experienced as a narrowing of the school experience. Long-standing elements of teen life—leavers' parties, social nights, talent shows, inter-class competitions and vibrant student elections were scaled back or tightly regulated.

Proms, while not banned, were advised against extravagance and late-night activities. In practice, this meant toned-down celebrations or outright cancellations in some schools. For finalists, it felt less like regulation and more like the loss of a cherished rite of passage.

Student leadership elections changed too. The once colourful campaigns, posters and rallies gave way to subdued manifesto readings at assembly. While intended to reduce excess, many students felt deprived of opportunities to practise leadership through engagement, persuasion and

creativity.

Visitation days were tightened, limiting family interaction—an emotional anchor for many boarders. Above all, students expressed frustration that the changes came with little consultation, leaving them feeling managed rather than guided.

As debates continue, one question remains unresolved: can discipline coexist with joy, creativity and expression? For teens, school is not only about academics—it is where identity is formed and memories are made.

Loss, grief and the question of student safety

Perhaps the heaviest moments of 2025 were those that plunged the nation into mourning.

Several student deaths dominated headlines, raising urgent questions about safety, supervision and accountability in schools. At Seeta High School, a series of tragic incidents drew national attention. In August, Senior Six student Kevin Nsamba drowned in the school swimming pool, prompting scrutiny of safety protocols. Earlier in the year, the death of a Senior Three student Elishama Ssesaazi in a dormitory raised concern due to limited information and slow investigations.

Ntare School's Senior Five student Elvis Magambo was later found dead in River Ruzizi after reportedly leaving school while suspended, intensifying concern about welfare systems beyond school gates.

Later still, the body of 15-year-old Melisa Aneza of Naalya Secondary School was discovered under suspected murder circumstances, deepening national anxiety.

These tragedies reignited conversations about student welfare, mental health support, transparency and institutional responsibility. Parliament ordered investigations, acknowledging a worrying pattern that could no longer be ignored. For many teens, 2025 was the year innocence cracked, replaced by sobering questions about safety in spaces meant to protect them.

2026.... The Year Ahead

As 2025 draws to a close, it leaves behind lessons that cannot be ignored. You celebrated loudly, questioned boldly and mourned deeply. You experienced joy and restriction, clarity and confusion, hope and heartbreak—sometimes all at once. Yet through it all, teens showed remarkable resilience.

What teens are now asking for is not just better parties or clearer syllabi. They are asking to be included in conversations that shape their lives, be protected in spaces meant to nurture them and be allowed moments of joy alongside discipline.

As schools reopen in 2026, the challenge will be balancing control and trust, structure and expression, reform and readiness. The teens of today are watching closely, and they will remember who listened.



The GN Trybe outreach at Trinity College Nabbingo left the girls in high spirits.



Singer Allan Toniks poses with TRICONA girls after his performance at GN Trybe.