



Summary of Proceedings

Public Hearing

Held on **Wednesday, November 27 2024** from 10:15 a.m. to 12:38 p.m.

Venue: Linda Baboolal Meeting Room, Ground Floor, Parliamentary Complex, Cabildo Building, St Vincent Street, Port of Spain.

Subject matter: An examination into the state's response to underperformance at the nation's primary and secondary schools, the adequacy of the Student Support Services Division (SSSD) and its impact on school dropouts at the primary and secondary school levels in Trinidad and Tobago.

The **objectives of the inquiry** are as follows:

1. To assess the current performance levels at key examination checkpoints including SEA, CSEC and CAPE;
2. To examine the rates of truancy and school dropouts at the primary and secondary school levels over the past decade;
3. To evaluate the capacity and effectiveness of the Student Support Services Division and interventions for students; and
4. To review and analyse the effectiveness of the current strategies aimed at addressing underperformance, truancy, and school dropouts at the primary and secondary levels.

Committee Members

The following Committee Members were present:

- Dr. Paul Richards –Chairman
- Mr. Roger Monroe, MP –Vice Chairman
- Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP - Member
- Ms. Pennelope Beckles, MP – Member
- Mr. David Nakhid – Member

The following Committee Members were excused:

- Mr. Avinash Singh - Member
- Mr. Rohan Sinanan – Member
- Mr. Esmond Forde, MP –Member

Witnesses who appeared

The following officials of the **Ministry of Education** (MOE) appeared:

- **Ms. Gwyneth-Ann Morris-Alexander**
Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
- **Mr. Aaron Ramrattan**
Chief Education Officer (Ag.)
- **Ms. Vashti Ramdeen-Steele**
Director of School Supervision (Ag.)
- **Ms. Anna Singh**
Director of Curriculum Planning and Development Division
- **Ms. Kamini Bhagaloo**
Director of Education Research and Evaluation (Ag.)
- **Dr. Ayinka Nurse-Carrington**
Manager of Student Support Services Division

Key Recommendations from Discussions:

The following key recommendation emerged from discussions:

- i. That the Ministry of Education consider providing a monthly stipend to Mentors as a means of incentivizing their performance. Offering a monetary incentive would also introduce an obligatory element in the performance of their duties and would thus allow the Ministry to hold mentor accountable for their output.

Key Issues Discussed

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the Ministry of Education:

Definition of Underperformance in the context of student placement

- i. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), underperformance, in the context of student placement, is defined as students whose overall weighted composite score is thirty percent (30%) or below.
- ii. In 2024, two thousand, seven hundred and eleven (2,711) of the total number of students sitting the SEA examination scored below 30%.
- iii. There was an increase in the number of students scoring below 30% in English Language Arts writing, especially in non-fiction text, fiction text and poetry scansion.

Schools of Focus

- i. The educational districts with the highest number of underperforming schools are the North-eastern Educational District, the Port of Spain Educational District and the South-eastern Educational District.
- ii. There are eighty (80) primary schools of focus and twenty-six (26) secondary schools of focus.

Remediation Mechanisms

- i. The Ministry uses a score of 30 percent and below in the SEA as the benchmark for categorising low student performance. However, additional support by way of remediation programmes are provided for students scoring under 50 % percent.
- ii. To identify underperforming students before transition to secondary schools, the MOE would analyse student performance in relation to formative and summative assessments at all primary school levels. The primary schools conduct analyses based on the assessments, examining the areas where students need improvement. If it is found that students are unable to cope based on assessments and observations, they are then allowed to repeat the class level.
- iii. Teachers are also trained to address challenges identified and to provide additional support to students.
- iv. The MoE reintroduced the Trinidad and Tobago National Learning Assessment (TTNLA) and this was conducted in 2024 with Standard 1 and Standard 3 students.
- v. Based on the findings from the TTNLA, the Ministry can identify areas for providing additional support for students and the training of teachers in remediation, pedagogy and approaches to treat with students.
- vi. Examples of remediation programmes offered by the MoE include the Vacation Revision Programme which is held during the July/August period and the After School Support Education Programme.
- vii. The Vacation Revision Programme is not mandatory for students.
- viii. The After School Support Education Programme is provided for students of Standards 3, 4, and 5.
- ix. The After School Support Education Programme is scheduled for 3:15 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. and in some cases there is flexibility based on the needs of the student, where classes are held in the morning period instead.
- x. The Ministry identified and targeted eighty (80) schools of focus at the primary level for remediation through the After School Support Programme.
- xi. The After School Support Education Programme provides additional support for students in the areas of literacy and numeracy.
- xii. There was noted participation issues at these schools of focus.
- xiii. In 2023, the MoE recruited a team from the University of the Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) to train teachers at schools of focus in remediation. Manuals were subsequently created based on this training and have since been circulated to other schools.
- xiv. The remediation training is expected to be expanded to all schools.

Rate of Improvement

- i. In 2023, thirty (30) schools improved compared to 2022. A further thirteen (13) schools showed improvement in 2024, compared to 2023, in SEA scores.

- ii. The number of schools overall that showed improvement in performance compared to the number of schools of focus is quite low.
- iii. The MoE stated that one of the reasons for low improvement rates was that full participation of students who are catered for in remediation programmes is not always achieved.
- iv. The MoE stated that adjustments to the programme would be made as the case arises.

Challenges with Participation in Remediation Programmes

- i. The current overall participation rate is approximately sixty-five percent (65%).
- ii. Some of the main reasons for non-participation include, absence due to poverty, health challenges of the student and/or their caretaker, familial factors and community factors, such as students coming from “under-resourced communities” with gang influences and heavy violence.
- iii. Additional challenges noted by the MoE included socio-economic factors, such as unemployment of the parent.
- iv. Other community factors include livelihood – for example fishing villages where schools may be based. Parents keep their children away from school so that they can help with the livelihood.
- v. The MoE collaborates with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, providing parents with information about various grants available to assist students.

Measures to address Challenges with Participation in Remediation Programmes

- i. Parental counselling is offered and the SSSD would reach out to parents concerning their children’s education and the importance of their involvement in their child’s academic growth.
- ii. When needed, home visits are conducted by school social workers and they would assist parents to get their children on board with the remediation programmes that are being offered.
- iii. The Ministry provides support, including school meals, transportation, and access to funding, to ensure that students benefit from the School Development Programmes.
- iv. In 2024, the Ministry launched a school grant with approximately twenty thousand (20,000) beneficiaries. The MoE is also preparing for a 2025 disbursement.
- v. Although state-funded transportation is offered to students, there is still a reliance on PTSC and maxi-taxi concessioners through PTSC for transportation services. There are some challenges with getting concessioners for particular areas.
- vi. Due to the challenges with concessioners, some students may be unable to stay after school for the remediation programme.

Teacher Vacancies

- i. The MoE stated that there may be delays with the appointment of teachers which could be a factor impacting teaching time with students
- ii. There are approximately thirteen thousand, five hundred (13,500) teachers at the primary and secondary level.
- iii. The MoE is currently engaged in filling ninety-six (96) vacancies in government primary schools and forty-four (44) at denominational schools.
- iv. At the secondary level, there are two hundred and ninety three (293) vacancies which are currently being addressed.
- v. The MoE operates two (2) systems with regard to the filling of vacancies:

- (1) there is the substitute teacher system that principals can access and utilise in the interim absence of teachers; and
- (2) a system is in place to fill permanent vacancies for subject areas in secondary schools.

Mentorship Programme

- i. The MoE's Corporate Communications Division issued a call for voluntary mentors in 2024.
- ii. The Ministry's Corporate Communications Division, in 2024, issued advertisements, requesting persons who are interested in being mentors. The Ministry then undertook the processing of these persons to determine their suitability for the mentorship programme.
- iii. To be a mentor, the MoE requests background information and a Certificate of Good Character. Persons within the MoE vets interested persons.
- iv. As at November 27, 2024, the MoE had sixty-one (61) mentors deployed.
- v. The mentors are provided preliminary training and are then matched to a school where their talents and competencies align to the needs of the students at the identified school.
- vi. The mentorship programme faces challenges because the programme relies on goodwill, and in some instances, some interested persons were not able to sustain their involvement.
- vii. The Ministry has also embarked on an approach to curriculum reform through "Re Engaging for Success" using the Cultural Transformation Policy. In this programme, the Ministry aims to engage students in improving their entrepreneurial skills and talents, while also encouraging them to give back and become more engaged in their communities.
- viii. The MoE has collaborated with the Ministry of Sport and Community Development regarding the Sport Icon Programme.
- ix. At twenty-six (26) secondary schools of focus, seventy-one (71) mentors have volunteered their services.
- x. Of the seventy-one (71) mentors, thirty-four (34) are currently active and engaging students in both motivational and career avenues.
- xi. Mentors meet with their mentees at least twice a week.
- xii. The Ministry is hoping that within the start of term two there will be a full complement of mentors.
- xiii. The Adopt-a- School initiative involves private companies, NGOs or individuals providing financial support to assist schools to build certain aspects of their curriculum delivery for example ICT, Library or Agricultural Science. The initiative was launched in February 2024.
- xiv. There are sixty (60) projects where private companies, NGOs and individuals have pledged support to initiatives in both denominational and government schools across all districts.

District Leadership Teams

- i. At the educational district level, the MoE has district leadership teams.

- ii. District leadership teams not only implement the initiatives in the school of focus, but also assist with other schools that require visitation and support within the educational district.
- iii. District leaders meet once a week to discuss issues affecting students' performance and plan visits.
- iv. District leaders meet with the principals and teachers for an in-depth diagnostic of what is happening at the school level, at each class level and assist teachers where issues are explicitly identified dealing with curriculum implementation.
- v. The district leaders also provide monitoring and support when required.

School Climate Survey

- i. The Ministry conducted the School Climate Survey at all primary and secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago in 2024.
- ii. The survey was introduced to schools as the MoE recognised the importance of a safe and secure environment for learning and enhancing student performance.
- iii. The survey was conducted at standards 1-3 in primary schools and forms 4-5 in secondary schools.

The Restorative Practices Programme

- i. The Restorative Practices Programme began in October 2023.
- ii. The objective of the programme was to assist in creating supportive school communities.
- iii. The programme was piloted in eleven (11) out of twenty-six (26) secondary schools of focus.
- iv. The Ministry reviewed suspension data and from that ascertained which schools within different educational districts were eligible for this programme to run the pilot test. All seven districts were included, however, some districts may have more than one school involved in the pilot of the programme.
- v. The programme is working well despite facing some challenges with community buy-in of the new programme.
- vi. The Ministry plans to extend the programme to the other fifteen (15) schools of focus after two (2) years.
- vii. The Ministry is currently in the process of furniture acquisition, devices and other resources that are needed to effectively manage the programme.

Student Support Services Division

- i. The Student Support Services Division comprises five (5) main units.
- ii. The Guidance and Counselling Unit is charged with educational intervention and guiding students.
- iii. The SSSD stated that although the number of personnel assigned to the Division has increased, there is a deficit in other essential resources.
- iv. Currently, there are six hundred and eighty-one (681) filled positions in the SSSD.
- v. As at November 27, 2024, there were three hundred and sixty-one (361) vacancies at the Division.
- vi. Recruitment is ongoing with some major positions to be filled in January and February 2025.

- vii. The SSSD stated that there is sufficient personnel to address the needs at Schools of Focus.
- viii. Caseloads may be high in certain education districts; however, critical incidents are dealt with immediately.
- ix. Regular referrals will go through a period of fourteen days through a (Multi-disciplinary Team (MDT)).
- x. There were three thousand nine hundred and ninety (3,990) referrals received by the district between September 2022 and August 2023 at the primary level and six thousand, eight hundred and ninety (6,890) cases at the secondary level.

Teacher Regularity and Punctuality

- i. The Ministry takes teacher absenteeism very seriously. Progressive discipline would be taken if teachers are persistently unpunctual or irregular.
- ii. Teacher absenteeism is affecting some schools and disciplinary action would have been initiated.
- iii. The percentage of teacher attendance is approximately 85% in primary and secondary schools.

Cases of Bullying

- i. MoE stated that for the period 2022 to 2024, there were seventy-seven (77) reports of bullying at the primary school level and four hundred and seventy (470) reports in secondary schools, which would have led to suspensions.
- ii. The number of reports of bullying is on the decline.
- iii. The Ministry launched the Cultural Transformation Policy, which is a series of activities for students one of which is “No to Violence” campaign, that includes discussions on bullying and other forms of indiscipline where students would be affected.

Gangs in Schools

- i. It was stated that the MoE depends on the Ministry of National Security and police officers to provide information on gangs in schools. The MoE does not get too involved at that level but once it comes through the Police Service, the Ministry would investigate concerns connect to the school environment and the steps they can take to address the issue.
- ii. In the event that a teacher or student is threatened within the school, the principal would advise the teacher or student to report it to the police and from there, the police will handle it because of the sensitive nature and the safety of the persons involved.

Student Absenteeism and School Dropouts

- i. The MoE reported an increase in school dropouts in public schools by one hundred and eight percent (108%) at the primary school level from eighty-eight (88) students in 2021-2022 to one hundred and eighty-three (183) students in 2022-2023.
- ii. There is a higher proportion of males dropping out of school compared to females.
- iii. The Ministry stated that the home environment and circumstances related to this may have contributed to male students being unable to attend school.

- iv. It was stated that the dropout data captures dropout rates from public schools, and there is not a true reflection of the national dropout rate, as some students may have left the public school system to attend private schools or are being home-schooled. Additionally, others may be sixteen years old and have left school to work.
- v. The MoE stated that school principals are responsible for monitoring attendance and if a student suddenly drops out, the principal is responsible for contacting the parent to find out what is happening. In some cases, this information is not forthcoming from the parent.
- vi. In 2023, there were reports of five thousand, nine hundred and ninety-five (5,995) students at both primary and secondary schools who were chronically absent. This figure dropped to three thousand, nine hundred and twenty (3,920) in 2024.

Mental Health Support and Programmes

- i. The SSSD provides psychosocial support to students who are afflicted by trauma.
- ii. The Developmental Assessment Unit of the SSSD has clinical psychologists, behavioural psychologists and school psychologists who provide psychosocial support. The Division's school social workers also run mental health support programmes.
- iii. The Division recently had a programme called "Safe Communities, Safe Schools" under the Cultural Transformation Policy and the "No to Violence" initiative where students would engage in group sessions, individual sessions and other projects targeted to building awareness, capacity and helping to build resiliency and coping skills.
- iv. The Developmental Assessment Unit currently has thirteen clinical psychologists and they work within the educational districts.
- v. In the districts there are school psychologists, clinical psychologists and behavioural psychologists who provide support to any school that needs it.
- vi. The team of psychologists are only seen through a referral system, after a student has undergone classroom guidance or met with a school social worker and still has psychosocial or behavioural challenges.
- vii. The psychologists will perform psychoeducational assessments on the student and if needed, may refer the student to external agencies, for example, Child Guidance, if they recognize that medication is needed.

Workshops on Educational Support and Parenting Skills

- i. It was stated that the Parenting in Education Programme should be conducted at least once per month and it is dependent on availability. The session is offered in person and virtually.
- ii. Sometimes, sessions are not held at schools because of the environment and parents do not feel safe. To counter this, the Ministry may host the session at a different location (for example, a library) where parents can meet.
- iii. The sessions help parents understand the value of education and how to manage their children's learning.
- iv. The Ministry also has parent information sessions done by Guidance Officers and in collaboration with teachers at PTA meetings.

Mental Health issues since COVID

- i. The SSSD noted changes in student behaviour since COVID. The Ministry underscored that the pandemic has adversely affected both the adult and child populations.
- ii. The Division has observed changes in communication skills and conflict resolution skills among students and as a result, the Ministry moved to put programmes and personnel in place to try to support students.

This public hearing can be viewed on demand via our YouTube Channel.

[23rd Meeting -JSC Social Services & Public Administration - November 27, 2024 Underperformance in Schools](#)

Contact the Committee's Secretary

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Committees Unit

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