PAC

PARLIAMENT

REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

SEVENTH REPORT OF THE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

C O M M I T T E E

SECOND SESSION OF THE 11TH PARLIAMENT

Inquiry Examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Years 2014 and 2015 with specific reference to the Ministry of Education.

Public Accounts Committee[1]

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) established by the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in accordance with Section 119(4) is mandated to consider and report to the House of Representatives on:

"(a) appropriation accounts of moneys expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago;
(b) such other accounts as may be referred to the Committee by the House of Representatives or as are authorized or required to be considered by the committee under any other enactment; and
(c) the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts."

Current membership

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	Chairman[2]
Mr. Rodger Samuel	Vice- Chairman
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Mr. Randall Mitchell	Member
Dr. Lester Henry	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member
Ms. Marlene McDonald	Member
Ms. Jennifer Raffoul	Member

Committee Staff

The current staff members serving the Committee are:

Ms Keiba Jacob	Secretary to the Committee
Ms Hema Bhagaloo	Assistant Secretary to the Committee
Mr Darien Buckmire	Parliamentary Intern

Publication

An electronic copy of this report can be found on the Parliament website: www.ttparliament.org

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[1] The PAC of the Eleventh Republican Parliament was established by resolutions of the House of Representatives and the Senate at sittings held on Friday November 13, 2015 and Tuesday November 17, 2015 respectively.
[2] The Committee held its first meeting on Wednesday December 2, 2015. At this meeting the Committee elected Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie as Chairman, in accordance with Section 119(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. At that same meeting, the Committee resolved that its quorum should comprise of three (3) Members, inclusive of the Chairman and any other Opposition Member.

Contents

MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE 4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 5
INTRODUCTION 7
Election of the Chairman and Vice Chairman 7
Changes in Membership 7
Establishment of Quorum 8
METHODOLOGY 8
Determination of the Committee's Work Programme 8
The Inquiry Process 9
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION PROFILE 11
ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS 15
Ministry of Education – Concluding Remarks 24
APPENDIX I 27
Meetings 27
APPENDIX II 28
Minutes of Meeting 28
INTRODUCTION OF THE NEW COMMITTEE MEMBER 28
APPENDIX III 32
Notes of Evidence 32

MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT,

REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie
Chairman

Mr. Rodger Samuel
Vice-Chairman

Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy
Member

Mr. Randall Mitchell
Member

Dr. Lester Henry
Member

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon
Member

Ms. Marlene McDonald
Member

Ms. Jennifer Raffoul
Member

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The PAC presents its Seventh Report of the Eleventh Parliament which details its examination of the ***Auditor General's Report on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago with specific reference to the Ministry of Education (MoE) for the Financial Years 2014 and 2015.***

During this examination, the Committee took the opportunity to discuss with the Ministry of Education:

- The general issues relating to the performance of the Ministry of Education;
- The relationship between the Ministry of Education and other state entities;
- The role of the Ministry of Education in maintaining the education and development of children across the country; and
- The challenges faced by the Ministry of Education in carrying out its duties.

Based on the Committee's examination the following recommendations were proposed:

- The MOE should liaise with the Comptroller of Accounts to ensure persons receive the pension benefits within six (6) months after submitting their claim;
- The Public Service Commission and the Chief Personnel Officer should make the outfitting of the MOE with proper staffing a priority;
- The Accounting Officer should put more emphasis on conducting site visits on the projects the Ministry is financing to ensure value for money;
- Implementing the electronic storage of documents in each school will allow information to be more easily accessed, tracked and updated enabling the information collected to be presented to the MOE in a timely manner when requested;
- The MoE and all its Divisions should take the necessary steps to be more proactive in ensuring that they discharge their duties more effectively and efficiently;
- The Ministry of Education needs to have more stringent checks centered around the early detection of overpayments;

- The Permanent Secretary should prepare a request for the Treasury to assist with the training of persons currently in the Internal Audit Unit; and
- The Ministry should prioritize that its Contract Registers are properly maintained and updated accordingly

INTRODUCTION

The PAC of the Eleventh Republican Parliament was established by resolution of the House of Representatives and the Senate at the sittings held on Friday November 13, 2015 and Tuesday November 17, 2015 respectively.

The Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago mandates that the Committee shall consider and report to the House appropriation accounts of moneys expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago and the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.

In addition to the Committee's powers entrenched in the Constitution, the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives also empower the Committee (but is not limited) to:

a) send for persons, papers and records;
b) have meetings whether or not the House is sitting;
c) meet in various locations;
d) report from time to time; and
e) communicate with any other Committee on matters of common interest.

Election of the Chairman and Vice Chairman

In accordance with section 119(2) of the Constitution, the Chairman must be a member of the Opposition in the House. At the first meeting held on Wednesday December 2, 2015 Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie was elected Chairman of the Committee. At the said meeting, Mr. Wade Mark was elected Vice Chairman of the Committee.

Changes in Membership

- By resolution of the Senate made on December 8, 2015, Mr. Rodger Samuel replaced Mr. Wade Mark as a Member of this Committee.
- Mr. Rodger Samuel was elected Vice-Chairman of the Committee in lieu of Mr. Wade Mark on Wednesday December 16, 2016.
- By resolution of the Senate made on December 19, 2016, Ms. Jennifer Raffoul replace Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir as a Member of this Committee.

Establishment of Quorum

The Committee is required by the Standing Orders to have a quorum so that any decisions made by the Members during the meetings can be considered valid. A quorum of three (3) Members, inclusive of the Chair or Vice-Chairman), with representatives from both Houses was agreed to by the Committee at its First Meeting.

METHODOLOGY

Determination of the Committee's Work Programme

The Committee agreed to an (15) entity second session work programme during its second meeting on Wednesday December 16, 2016. After reviewing the proposed Work Schedule for the 2nd Session which was prepared by the Secretariat, the Committee agreed to examine (8) entities in the following order:

1. Ministry of Education;
2. Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC);
3. Ministry of Health;
4. Regional Health Authorities (RHA);
5. Land Settlement Agency (LSA);
6. Judiciary of Trinidad and Tobago;
7. Ministry of Legal Affairs; and
8. Ministry of Communications and Public Administration

The Inquiry Process

The Inquiry Process outlines the steps taken by the Committee when conducting the inquiry into the operations of MoE. The following steps outline the Inquiry Process agreed to by the PAC:

I. Identification of issues in the Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for 2014 and 2015 on the MoE;
II. Preparation of Inquiry Proposals for the selected entities. The Inquiry Proposal outlines:
    a. Background;
    b. Objective of Inquiry; and
    c. Proposed Questions.
III. Consideration and approval of Inquiry Proposals by the Committee and when approved, questions are forwarded to the MoE for written responses;
IV. Issue of requests for written comment from the public are made via Parliament's website, social media accounts, newspaper and advertisements (optional);
V. Preparation of an Issues Paper by the Secretariat for the Committee's consideration, based on written responses received from the entities. The Issues Paper identifies and summarizes any matters of concern in the responses provided by the MoE or received from stakeholders and the general public;
VI. Review of the responses provided and the Issues Paper by the Committee;
VII. Conduct of a site visit to obtain a first-hand perspective of the implementation of a project (optional);
VIII. Determination of the need for a Public Hearing based on the analysis of written submissions and the site visit (if required). If there is need for a public hearing, the relevant witnesses will be invited to attend and provide evidence. In this instance, a public hearing was held on Wednesday January 25, 2017;
IX. Issue of written request to the entity for further details should the Committee require any additional information after the public hearing; and

X. Report Committee’s findings and recommendations to Parliament upon conclusion of the inquiry.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION PROFILE

Background

The Ministry of Education (MoE) is the government entity responsible for the management and administration of public education in Trinidad and Tobago.

Divisions/Units:[3]

Information Communication Technology	Instructional Materials
Support Student Services	Internal Audit
School Supervision	Int'l Cooperation Initiatives
School Library Services	Legal
Finance and Accounts	Local School Boards
Educational Services	NSDS
Educational Research and Evaluation	Occupational Research
Curriculum	Peace Promotion
Support Student Services	RDAU
Textbook Rental	School Broadcasting Unit
Adult Education	School Publication Unit
Distance Education	Teacher Ed & Performance
Employee Assistance Program	Examinations

Mission[4]

To educate and develop children who are:

- able to fulfill their full potential;
- healthy and growing normally;
- academically balanced;

[3] Ministry of Education website accessed 09/Feb/2017 http://moe.edu.tt/
[4] Ministry of Education website accessed 09/Feb/2017 http://moe.edu.tt/

- well-adjusted socially and culturally; and
- emotionally mature and happy.

Vision[5]

The Ministry is a high performing and dynamic organization leading a quality education system that is responsive to the diverse needs of 21st century learners to contribute to the education and versatility of holistically developed children who are able to satisfy the human capital needs and sustainable development of society.

Ministerial Priorities[6]

- Preserve, maintain and expand where necessary, our system of free education and training at all levels.
- Ensure that the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) system, which we created in 2004, remains relevant, easily accessible and available to all citizens who need it.
- Support our two public universities, University of the West Indies (UWI) and University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT), to achieve maximum efficiency and high standards, while avoiding duplication and wastage.
- Develop a culture of Discipline, Production and Tolerance in all schools and emphasize these core values in the curriculum.
- Implement a comprehensive, efficient, targeted, timely and sustainable school maintenance programme to cope with our ageing school infrastructure, utilizing Local Government bodies to implement the works, where feasible.
- Replace all outdated or old and dilapidated schools with new modern buildings and facilities and construct new schools in areas where they are most needed.
- Emphasize the richness of our cultural diversity and eliminate any dissonance that may arise from ethnic, cultural, religious and class differences.
- Emphasize the teaching of our country's history and geography in schools.

[5] Ministry of Education website accessed 09/Feb/2017 http://moe.edu.tt/
[6] Ministry of Education website accessed 09/Feb/2017 http://moe.edu.tt/

- Mobilize the artistic community to take a leadership role in cultural diversification and cultural education.
- Ensure that our system of education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, prepares our young people for the challenging world of science and technology.
- Ensure that the education and training of our teachers is adequate to meet the challenges that face our young people, including penetration of foreign cultures, technological devices and social media.
- Foster, develop and encourage best practices in the administration of the educational system.
- Provide clear prospects for advancement by all teachers in their career and profession.
- Equip all schools to benefit from technological innovations.
- Ensure that all students in all schools have free and easy access to fast Broadband Internet in all schools (not just laptops).
- Ensure that our post-secondary and tertiary education is relevant.
- Ensure that our school curriculum and teaching methods are relevant and continuously updated and lead to innovation, entrepreneurship and wealth creation.
- Develop and encourage a culture of research and development in all tertiary level institutions, both public and private.
- Maintain first world standards in terms of enrollment and participation of our citizens in post-secondary and tertiary education.
- Provide appropriate mechanisms for second chances for students at all levels.
- Ensure universal early childhood education and maintain and continue our system of universal secondary and tertiary education, while ensuring access to the highest levels of education in all areas of the country especially Tobago.
- Promote and encourage continuing education and adult education.
- Fully integrate sports, culture, language arts and physical education into the education system.
- Harmonize, rationalize and modernize the legislation governing the education sector.

- Integrity – The equitable and honest treatment of all internal and external stakeholders, building mutual trust and respect.
- Good Governance – The maintenance of objectivity in decision-making, fairness in the consideration of stakeholders? Interests, acceptance of accountability for actions and the demonstration of socially responsible behaviour.
- Transparency – Adherence to the highest level of transparency in all operations.
- Quality Service – The provision of professional and excellent service via the efficient and effective use of resources.
- Customer-oriented – Commitment to the achievement of customer satisfaction at all service points.
- Collaboration – Commitment to partnering with stakeholders to work towards the achievement of shared national goals.
- Open Communication – Foster an environment that would allow the sharing of information and transference of the knowledge resource

Minister of Education, the Honourable Anthony Garcia
Minister of State in the Ministry of Education, Dr. the Honourable Lovell Francis
Permanent Secretary - Mrs. Lenore Baptiste-Simmons (Ag)
Accounting Officer - Ms. Angela Sinaswee- Gervais (Ag)

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the examination of the Reports of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial years ended September 30, 2014 and September 30, 2015, the following issues were identified and recommendations proposed:

i. Internal Audit

The lack of the efficiency and effectiveness of the internal audit function has been identified as a common issue throughout the public service. In the Auditor General Reports for both 2014 and 2015, evidence of internal audit reviews were not seen on any of the documents examined at the time of the audit in November of both years. The Ministry explained that the Internal Audit Unit (IAU) had been involved in the verification of arrears due to public servants and could not complete their work programme. The Internal Audit Unit is responsible for ensuring that all instructions of the Comptroller of Accounts are adhered to and also in instances where there were weaknesses, systems were put in place to treat with the weaknesses and to eliminate the breaches that may arise. With an IAU comprised of approximately 22 persons, the MOE stated that more technical officers were required with the appropriate competencies to be able to do the job at the Ministry.

Recommendations:

- **The Permanent Secretary should prepare a request for the Financial Management Branch of the Treasury Division in the Ministry of Finance to assist with the training of persons currently in the Internal Audit Unit; and**
- **The Public Service Commission should hire more adequately qualified persons to fill the unit's vacancies so that the Internal Audit function can be executed with credibility.**
- **The Internal Audit Unit should be strengthened to ensure not just efficiency and effectiveness but compliance of other units in the Ministry.**

ii. Overpayments

Overpayments have been identified as an ongoing problem of major concern in the Ministry. In the financial year of 2014, there were 714 cases of overpayments totaling

$6,247,727.69 in comparison to the amount of $1,484,131.17 recovered which included recoveries relating to prior year overpayments. In 2015, there were 1107 cases of overpayments totaling $9,530,791.03 of which only $4,348,271.36 was recovered. According to the Auditor General, as a result of overpayments, resources are spent on accounting, recovery, reporting and auditing as well as. At times, emotional strain can be placed on the overpaid person involved in the recovery process. Overpayments have been an issue that the MOE is aware of and the cause has been pinpointed to the district offices where the information has to come from the school to the district office to the Ministry of Education, and by the time that happens, they could be paying someone who might be on leave. The Ministry has stated that it has put in place some new systems in HR to treat with minimizing their overpayment issue. It was explained that Ministry utilized technology which allowed certificates and applications for leave to be emailed to the Ministry to facilitate faster processing. The MOE accepted that communication channels with the schools can be established so that information can be transferred faster and more accurately as a means to avoid overpayments from occurring. The Ministry stated it is guided by Financial Regulations Sections – 83 to 85 when dealing with overpayments. Also, it was mentioned that any overpayments in arrears for the officers that are recorded in the circulars from the school principals and school supervisors will be recovered. The MOE accepted that there was an existing issue but efforts are being made to put systems in place to reduce overpayments.

Recommendation:

- **The Ministry should implement more stringent checks on their records aimed at monitoring overpayments occurrences. Monthly checks should be performed by the MOE's accounting department so that there can be early detection of overpayments and it can be dealt with immediately;**
- **The Ministry should establish an overpayment register or if already in existence, updated and maintained to monitor the existence and recovery of overpayments;**
- **Additional measures should be implemented to ensure that repayments are recovered within two (2) months after the overpayment has been discovered.**

The amount and the date of the overpayment should be recorded in the overpayment register and the person involved should be notified and arrangements made for the recovery of the funds; and

- **To eliminate the lag times between the transferring of information from the schools to the district offices and then to the Ministry, the Committee endorses the Ministry's use of emails, phone calls and faxes to acquire information faster but feel strongly that a digital solution to this problem is not too challenging to implement and this will ensure greater accuracy and precision.**

iii. Storage

Storage of payment vouchers and documents has been a problem identified by the Auditor General. Financial Instruction 34 requires that all payment vouchers be "…*carefully preserved and properly stored in a fire-proof safe or vault.*" Fire-proof safes or vaults were not used for storage of payment vouchers at the MOE. Ministries, Departments and Statutory Bodies are required to secure their documents in accordance with Financial Regulations, Chapter 69:01 for at least seven years. Further, Section 10 (2) of the Exchequer and Audit Act, Chapter 69:01 states that *"…the Auditor General shall have access to all records…"* The MOE acknowledged there was an issue with storage and stated that it will probably continue to be an issue because the Ministry is dealing with over 22,000 persons. With such a large complement of staff, it is more of a volume issue where more than 60 years of vouchers have to be kept. The Auditor General's Report for 2014 identified the MOE as one of the entities that did not store payment vouchers in fire –proof safes or vaults. The Ministry stated that it now has a vault, but mentioned that it might not be large enough to hold their records so they are looking for alternative sites.

Recommendations:

- **The MOE should pursue the implementation of an automated document management system that is incorporated with an integrated management information system. This will give managers a proper system of data storage whilst facilitating the monitoring of the organization as a whole; and**

- **The Permanent Secretary should liaise with the Minister of Finance on the matter of amending Financial Regulations 135 – 137 to include the ability to not hold documents for at least 60 years and the ability to use electronically stored data in place of the original version.**

iv. Pension and Leave

The timely payment of pension benefits has been identified as a significant issue at the MOE and throughout the public service. In the MOE, the HR unit and Pension and Leave unit are responsible for matters concerning the processing of pension and leave claims. Their process involves information first being gathered by HR, claims are then prepared by the Pension and Leave unit, the claim then gets audited and finally, gets signed off to go down to Comptroller of Accounts. Ultimate payment is still not in the MOE's hands but in the Comptroller of Accounts'. In the Auditor General's Report for 2015, the Ministry of Education had sent 586 P&L records to Comptroller of Accounts, of which 52 were being processed. Over the period under review, the Ministry unfortunately had some OSHA issues which affected a large part of the Ministry and resulted it some units only functioning five hours a day. The Accounting Department as well as the HR Unit had to work shorter days and this happened overs a 2 year period. With the sheer number of applications made and the shortened days experienced, the Ministry explained this created a backlog which they are trying clear right now. Having moved to a new building with better conditions, the HR and Pension and Leave Units are working to process as many claims from that 2 year period as possible. The Ministry acknowledges there was an issue and it currently working to rectify it.

Recommendations:

- **The Ministry should make every effort to ensure Pension and Leave of all officers are updated regularly and that Pension and Leave records of all officers are updated regularly and that Pension and Leave files are thoroughly checked and audited internally before submission to the Comptroller of Accounts within the stipulated deadlines;**

- **Pension and Leave records of retirees should be submit to the Comptroller of Accounts by the stipulated 3 months before the respective retirement dates; and**
- **A better communication strategy should be developed between the MOE and Comptroller of Accounts to ensure the timely processing and granting of pension and leave claims for retirees. This can be achieved by identifying an individual in the Ministry to act as a Liaison officer with the Comptroller of Accounts or relevant agency.**
- **These systems are manual and archaic. An automated system is now a necessity.**

v. Structure of the Ministry

Regarding the structure of the MOE, the Permanent Secretary noted that there are units in the Ministry that are understaffed due to expired contracts which has caused deficiencies in its operations. Adequate staff is imperative to ensure accountability and transparency when working in a Ministry as large as the Ministry of Education. The MOE explained that it is an HR issue where they know when the public officers are going to retire, but they are incapable of replacing them immediately once they leave. The reliance on the Public Service Commission (PSC) means that when requests for positions to be filled are submitted, the MOE has to wait for the PSC to appoint someone. In the meantime, the most senior person in HR is usually tasked with finding someone to fill the position short term. With respect to the contract employment, the MOE was by far the leader with persons employed in contract positions with 1605 in 2014 and 1754 in 2015. The hiring of persons on contract is a responsibility of the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications (PMCD). The Ministry stated that when requests are made to hire persons on contract, PMCD does not make the approvals in a timely manner. As a result, the Ministry stated it ends up having to make its own arrangements to eliminate the vacancies. The Ministry explained that is extremely proactive in asking for positions to be filled because they have compiled list of individuals who will be retiring soon and as such, are always aware that positions need to be filled. However, the

MOE noted that they now have the additional issue of funding restricting their ability to hire persons on contract employment, which had been helping them over the last few years. It was noted in the 2015 Auditor General's Report that 'Feedback from Ministries and Departments reveal that repetition of short term contracts have become necessary to ensure continuity of service delivery as the bureaucratic processes involved in the creation of and recruitment to established posts or long-term contracts are prohibitive due to the length of time and complexity involved.'

Recommendations

- **The Public Service Commission should make the outfitting of the MOE with proper staffing a priority because the MOE's function is a critical component in the development of the minds of this country's future leaders;**
- **The Personnel Department should draft more attractive compensation packages for the vacant permanent positions in the MOE so that the Public Service Commission will find it easier to fill the vacancies. This will serve to boost the staff compliment and increase the productivity of the MOE;**
- **The MOE should notify the Public Service Commission at most five years in advance and highlight that within that 5 year timeframe the number of individuals at the various levels in the ministry that are going to approach retirement so that replacements can be organized ahead of time; and**
- **The MOE should establish a mentorship programme where before a person retires they could be partnered with a younger/newer employee so that the older worker could train the younger employees so that they can tap into their expertise and gain insightful information on how do the jobs before the older employees leave.**

vi. Contracts not Produced

Contract agreements are necessary to ensure that goods/services are delivered to required specifications and that remedies for sub-standard performance exist and can be enforced. Financial Regulation 129 (2) also requires the original contract to be attached to the relevant payment voucher when the work to which a contract relates is completed along with a certificate of satisfactory completion of work. In the Auditor General's Report 2014, the agreement with the Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC) for the provision of transport to students was not provided. Related expenditure on this contract for the period October 2013 to August 2014 accrued $33,983,310.19. Also, the contract for logistics and distribution of laptops and laptop bags amounting to $2,386,250.00 for the period October 2013 to August 2014 was not produced. In the Auditor General's Report 2015, the auditors noted that a Register of Contracts as required by Financial Regulation 129 (1) was not produced therefore the particulars of all contracts awarded and relevant amounts outstanding could not be determined.

Recommendations:

- **The continuous updating and maintenance of a Contract Registers as required by Financial Regulation 129 (1) and (2) needs to become a priority in the MOE to ensure that proper records are being kept of the contracts executed and the parties involved. A contract register is important because it lets you know evaluate your suppliers based on seasonality, quantities and prices. It can also help an organization standardize on consistent contract terms and conditions;**
- **The Permanent Secretary should reinforce the need to have more regular checks on the records of the executed contracts the MOE is engaged in. Regular checks will ensure that every contract entered into, was properly stored and accounted for in their contract registers;**
- **Proper training should also be provided by the Financial Management Branch of the Treasury Division in the Ministry of Finance, for persons responsible for maintaining these registers. Also, if the legislation that requires documents to be stored in its original form is amended by the Attorney General, through usage of electronic data instead of hard copy, the ability to maintain the registers will be greatly improved; and**
- **Implementing electronic storage wherever possible will also make it easier to be access, tracked and update the contract registers which will in turn prove to be a major advantage to both the entity and the AGD because information will be presented in a timely manner.**

vii. Project Monitoring

To manage a project effectively means to identify and deal with problems before they occur and constantly monitoring the project to determine whether your actions are achieving their desired results and value for money. There was no evidence of site visits being made by officials of the Ministry to any of the projects sampled or that the projects were monitored to ensure successful completion or adherence to agreed terms and conditions. With respect to the site visits, the Ministry stated that the Educational Facilities Company Limited (EFCL) is responsible for conducting the site visits and reporting the findings to the MOE. Over time, the MOE explained that it got into many projects and had the EFCL act as their project manager and passed the responsibility of project monitoring to the EFCL. As a means of ensuring value for money, the Ministry has reinstituted site visits and presently has an engineer who would accompany the EFCL on the site visits. The engineer's purpose would be to ensure value for money in that the level of work completed is consistent with the invoices the MOE receives. The Ministry accepts that over the last year they weren't able to do the site visits as best as they would have liked and site visits conducted by the EFCL declined due to the EFCL having staff constraints. In addition to reinstituting site visits, the MOE explained that regular meetings will be held with the EFCL to go through the reports brought back from the visits

Recommendation:

- **The Ministry's Monitoring and Evaluation Unit needs to closely monitor every project the Ministry is engaged and conduct site visits as necessary. Value for money should be ensured in every decision and every project which is chosen to be done. When this is done projects will finish within the given time, costs will decrease and less time wasted;**
- **The Ministry should notify Public Service Commission about the vacancies in the Educational Facilities Company Limited (EFCL) so that additional, qualified staff can be provided for the vacancies in; and**
- **With respect to areas where the current staff maybe lacking in competency, the PSIP Unit of the Ministry of Planning and Development can provide the required**

training to strengthen the staff in weak areas as well as expand the scope of the MOE.

Ministry of Education – Concluding Remarks

The MOE should begin the process of implementing management information systems throughout its departments and units as well as the schools especially when retrieving data from physical storage is quite time consuming. An electronic integrated records and document management system needs to be established as a priority.

The strengthening of the IAD with more competent staff would allow for a more effective internal auditing function. The Internal Audit Function needs to be strengthened with more systems of accountability, rule and guideline clarification along with a greater sense of responsibility for compliance of units under its jurisdiction.

The establishment of simple software systems to help with integration, information sharing and collaboration will significantly reduce the Ministry's HR, overpayment and storage issues. This consideration should be explored immediately and supported by training for relevant personnel to work the software systems effectively. This is a matter of urgency.

The MOE should exercise their responsibility of ensuring value for money in the execution of their projects by conducting more site visits. By offering more effective technical supervision over the projects and programmes they undertake, the Ministry will truly be able to achieve value for money.

The implementation of follow ups on pension and leave claims should be further supported by the MOE. This will further ensure that the process of the retirees receiving their benefits occurs in a timely manner. Again this needs electronic and/or digital support.

The proper maintenance of Contract Registers should be emphasized to ensure that proper records are kept of the details of the contracts at the MOE. With these details on record, the Ministry will be able to evaluate its suppliers based on seasonality, quantities and prices offered which will aid in deciding whether to continue contract agreements with their current terms and conditions or not renew the contract entirely.

With the new Procurement legislation soon to be proclaimed establishing and accounting for a well-managed system is essential.

Given the high funding level of the Ministry of Education, the number of projects under its command, the importance of educational infrastructure and educational quality to the development process, the Auditor General must find more effective ways of having the Ministry of Education account for expenditure and performance. One gets the impression that the issues highlighted are not the issues of greatest value in the Ministry.

This Committee respectfully submits this Report for the consideration of the Parliament.

Sgd.
Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie
Chairman

Sgd.
Mr. Rodger Samuel
Vice-Chairman

Sgd.
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy
Member

Sgd.
Mr Randall Mitchell
Member

Sgd.
Dr. Lester Henry
Member

Sgd.
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon
Member

Sgd.
Ms. Marlene McDonald
Member

Sgd.
Ms. Jennifer Raffoul
Member

APPENDIX I

Meetings

At the meeting held on Wednesday January 25, 2017, the witnesses attending on behalf of Ministry of Education (MoE) were:

Auditor General's Department (AGD)

- Mr. Gary Peters - Assistant Auditor General
- Mr. Brian Caesar - Audit Executive II
- Ms. Sita Lewis - Audit Executive I

Ministry of Education (MoE)

- Ms. Angela Sinaswee-Gervais - Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
- Ms. Sharon Ashman-John - Deputy Permanent Secretary
- Ms. Shobha Jaisir - Deputy Permanent Secretary
- Mr. Dipnarine Mungal - Director of Finance and Accounts
- Ms. Lisa Henry-David - Director of Education Planning Division
- Ms. Kear Williams - Director of Human Resources
- Mr. Ashram Deoraj - Director of School Supervision
- Ms. Christine Sahajad - Administrative Officer IV
- Ms. Anjanie Samaroo - Auditor III

APPENDIX II
Minutes of Meeting

THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE –
SECOND SESSION, ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT

MINUTES OF THE THIRTEENTH MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2017 AT 10:20 A.M.
IN THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR, OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, TOWER D, THE PORT OF SPAIN INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, 1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT-OF-SPAIN.

Present were:

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	-	Chairman
Mr. Rodger Samuel	-	Vice- Chairman
Ms. Jennifer Raffoul	-	Member
Dr. Lester Henry	-	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	-	Member
Ms. Keiba Jacob	-	Secretary
Ms. Hema Bhagaloo	-	Assistant Secretary

Excused were:

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	-	Member
Mr. Randall Mitchell	-	Member
Ms. Marlene McDonald	-	Member

COMMENCEMENT

1.1 At 10:20 a.m. the Chairman called the meeting to order and welcomed those present. Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon, Mr. Randall Mitchell and Ms. Marlene McDonald were excused from the meeting.

INTRODUCTION OF THE NEW COMMITTEE MEMBER

2.1 The Chairman informed the Members that Ms. Jennifer Raffoul, was appointed to the Committee as a Member with effect from December 19, 2016 in lieu of Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir.

2.2 The Chairman welcomed Ms. Jennifer Raffoul to the Committee.

THE EXAMINATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE TWELFTH MEETING

3.1 The Committee examined the Minutes of the Twelfth (12th) Meeting held on Wednesday January 11, 2017.

3.2 There being no further omissions or corrections, the confirmation of Minutes were deferred to the next meeting which is scheduled for February 8, 2017.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE TWELFTH MEETING

4.1 The Chairman enquired whether Members reviewed the Committee's Draft Reports.

4.2 The Chairman invited Members to make any comments and or suggestions. After some discussion, it was agreed that the Reports were finalized and the Chairman directed the Secretariat to prepare the Committee's Reports for presentation at the House of Representative and the Senate

4.3 The Committee's Reports were confirmed on a motion moved by Mr. Roger Samuel and seconded by Dr. Lester Henry.

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSION RE: THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION (MoE)

5.1 The Committee agreed on the focus of the meeting which were the concerns raised in the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial years 2014 and 2015 related to the Ministry of Education (MoE).

5.2 There being no further business for discussion *in camera*, the Chairman suspended the meeting at 11:20 a.m.

EXAMINATION OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION (MoE)

6.1 The Chairman called the public meeting to order at 12:03 p.m.

6.2 The Chairman welcomed officials from the Ministry of Education (MoE), Auditor General's Department (AGD), members of the media and the public to the Thirteenth (13th) public hearing with the PAC and introductions were exchanged.

6.3 The following officials joined the meeting:

Auditor General's Department (AGD)

- Mr. Gary Peters - Assistant Auditor General
- Mr. Brian Caesar - Audit Executive II
- Ms. Sita Lewis - Audit Executive I

Ministry of Education (MoE)

- Ms. Angela Sinaswee-Gervais - Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
- Ms. Sharon Ashman-John - Deputy Permanent Secretary
- Ms. Shobha Jaisir - Deputy Permanent Secretary
- Mr. Dipnarine Mungal - Director of Finance and Accounts
- Ms. Lisa Henry-David - Director of Education Planning Division
- Ms. Kear Williams - Director of Human Resources
- Mr. Ashram Deoraj - Director of School Supervision
- Ms. Christine Sahajad - Administrative Officer IV
- Ms. Anjanie Samaroo - Auditor III

6.4 The following issues arose from the examination with the officials from the MoE:

- The role of the Permanent Secretary in ensuring the transparency and accountability of public funds;
- The weakness of the internal audit system at the Ministry;
- The initiatives to strengthen the internal audit function;
- The systems in place to address the pervasive issues identified in the Report of the Auditor General;
- The reasons and solutions to the issue of overpayments;
- The recommendations for the Public Accounts Committee to assist the Ministry in performing its duties and functions;
- The challenges and recommendations for the submission of pension and leave records for auditing in a timely manner;
- The status of the Ministry in becoming automated;
- The challenges of schools gaining national sponsorships from partnering with locally based businesses;
- The measures in place to improve the role of the Ministry in the oversight and monitoring functions of transportation for students;
- The reasons for the lack of site visit;
- The status of the contractual agreement between the Ministry, PTSC and Maxi-Taxi concessionaires;
- The number of personnel at the Ministry;

- The mechanisms in place to evaluate and monitor the number of trips made by PTSC and Maxi-Taxi concessionaires;
- The reasons for the large expenditure on school furniture; and
- The main areas of concern and recommendations by the Auditor General's Department;

Please see the attached verbatim notes for the detailed oral submission by the witnesses.

SUSPENSION

7.1 At 1:47 p.m., the Chairman suspended the *public* meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

8.1 The Committee agreed to examine the Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on a Special Audit of the Public Transport Service Corporation at the next meeting.

8.2 The Chairman thanked Members for their attendance and the meeting was adjourned to **Wednesday February 8, 2017.**

8.3 The adjournment was taken at 1:47 p.m.

We certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

CHAIRMAN

SECRETARY

January 26, 2017

APPENDIX III

Notes of Evidence

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRTEENTH MEETING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE HELD IN THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR (IN PUBLIC) TOWER D, THE PORT OF SPAIN INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, 1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2017, AT 12.03 P.M.

PRESENT

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	Chairman
Mr. Rodger Samuel	Vice-Chairman
Dr. Lester Henry	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Miss Jennifer Raffoul	Member
Miss Keiba Jacob	Secretary
Miss Hema Bhagaloo	Assistant Secretary

ABSENT

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member
Mr. Randall Mitchell	Member
Miss Marlene Mc Donald	Member

OFFICIALS FROM THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Ms. Angela Sinaswee-Gervais	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Mr. Ashram Deoraj	Director of School Supervision
Mr. Dipnarine Mungal	Director of Finance and Accounts (Ag.)
Ms. Lisa Henry-David	Director of Education Planning Division (Ag.)
Ms. Christine Sahajad	Administrative Officer IV

Ms. Sharon Ashman-John	Deputy Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Ms. Shobha Jaisir	Deputy Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Ms. Anjanie Samaroo	Auditor III
Ms. Kear Williams	Director, Human Resources

OFFICIALS FROM THE AUDITOR GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Mr. Gary Peters	Assistant Auditor General
Mr. Brian Caesar	Audit Executive II

Mr. Chairman: Good afternoon everybody. I want to take the opportunity to welcome all members of this Committee to the first session of the PAC in 2017. I want to also welcome the members from the Auditor General's Department and of course, all of you here, Permanent Secretary and your entire team from the Ministry of Education. I want to also take the opportunity to thank those listeners who are listening to us on radio and who are viewing us on Channel 11, on radio, it is 105.5, and there is also access on Parliament's YouTube Channel *ParlView*. So we welcome the public involvement and engagement and viewership and listenership.

The purpose of the meeting of the Public Accounts Committee is to examine the concerns raised in the reports of the Auditor General on the public accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial years 2014 and 2015 related to the Ministry of Education. We did a number of Ministries last year, Ministry of Education was not one of them, so we continue the work based on the 2014 and 2015 reports of the Auditor General and we begin with you in 2017, the Ministry of Education.

As a Committee, we are desirous of hearing from you as a key stakeholder at the Ministry of Education because we want to learn what the challenges that you are facing are and we want to determine some of the possible solutions to these challenges. The role of this Committee is to help the Ministry of Education to improve its delivery of services in an efficient, effective and economic manner.

What I will do now is to introduce members of the Committee who are present. There is one member who will join us shortly but I want to have the members of the Committee—I will ask them to introduce themselves and I will start with Sen. Lester Henry on the right there.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. I will now ask the members of the Auditor General's Department if they will introduce themselves and then we will ask the acting Permanent Secretary and her team to also introduce themselves.

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you all very, very much and I will now ask our Independent Senator who is a member of this Committee, and a new Member of the Committee, to introduce herself.

[*Introduction made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Senator. There is a second row behind the first row and I wonder if you can identify yourself. Is that okay?

[*Introductions made*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much and I also want to take the opportunity to welcome members of the public who might be in the gallery and I want to especially thank the press for being present at this particular meeting of the Public Accounts Committee where we examine the reports of the Auditor General on the Ministry of Education, and in which we engage the public servants led by the Acting Permanent Secretary from the Ministry of Education.

Before I go on, I do want to take the opportunity to acknowledge what today is—in international terms, under the United Nations sponsorship—on the 25th day of each month, this Parliament will continue to bring awareness of the United Nations observance of the international day for the elimination of violence against women, which will be observed on November 25th each year. The theme for this occasion, for observance of this occasion, is "Orange The World" and it encourages persons to engage in activities which highlight the issue on the 25th of each month for 2017.

As a result, some of our Members and staff of the Parliament have worn something orange to commemorate the occasion. I think you can see, if you look around, that they have done that and I have tried to get an orange tie myself and we encourage members of the public to join us as we keep awareness of the importance of working to end violence against women and girls.

And last year on that occasion, I will just take a second, in my constituency, we did observe it with great intensity and we involved all the 16 schools in my constituency, and we had a significant participation by people in the community. So remember this day, remember how important it is and let us do our part not just to observe it but to make the enlightened practices that go with its observance possible and also a reality in Trinidad and Tobago where we live.

So we begin now with the questions and I will ask the Permanent Secretary first. I will ask a few questions and then I will ask members around the table. I will start with Ayanna Webster-Roy after I have completed, but before I ask you a question, Permanent Secretary, I would like you to please make us an introductory statement so that we can understand the perspective from which you are coming.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to start with the vision of the Ministry of Education. Basically, we really want to be a high-performing, dynamic, vibrant organization that is responsive to the needs of our stakeholders and which work collaboratively, effectively and efficiently to educate and develop an intelligent, versatile, productive and well-rounded child. So, basically, what we are into is educating and developing our students.

At the time we are looking at the period October 2013 to September 2014 and then the other period October 2014 to September 2015, at that point in time, the Ministry of Education did have a strategic plan covering the period 2011 to 2015. This plan was approved by Cabinet in 2012 and a copy was submitted to the Auditor General's Department as far as I am aware. I joined the Ministry of Education in 2016. I have been there continuously from June so I am depending very strongly on information that I would have gathered for this session and the assistance of my officers, some of whom also only joined in 2016.

At the time, the Ministry of Education dealt with from early childhood care to secondary schools; it is a different Ministry of Education at this point. So we are dealing with a Ministry of Education that had seven educational districts. We were dealing with 125 government secondary schools, 444 government primary schools. We were dealing with staff amounting to thousands because we are dealing with teachers as well as civil servants as well as contract employees and also daily-rated employees.

So, seeing that we are dealing in that period, the questions, I guess, will be focused on that and we are here to answer your questions as best as we can, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much for your introduction. I will start with a very general question, PS. As accounting officer, basically you, or your predecessor or anyone who succeeds you, are responsible for ensuring that the financial business of the State for which you are responsible, in this case the Ministry of Education, is properly conducted and that public funds entrusted to your care, the PS's care, are properly safeguarded, and are applied only to the purposes intended by the Parliament through the appropriations process.

Now, this is a general question and I am asking you as we begin the discussion. How does a Permanent Secretary—and you are giving your perspective as the accounting officer—ensure accountability and transparency in performing your role and responsibility in three areas I want to identify for you? One is ensuring that the proper system of accounting as prescribed by the Treasury is established and maintained. So there is a system, there is a formula for doing things. How do you ensure that this is done according to the framework set out, exercising supervision over the receipt of public revenue? And thirdly, making proper provision for the safekeeping of public money and for the expenditure of public money.

So it is a general question and you will have whatever time you need to answer it and you are free to give whatever perspective you consider relevant.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Okay. We are looking at the systems of accounting which would have been established by the Comptroller of Accounts. We have set up an accounting unit which would be established specifically to do that. We also have the Internal Audit Unit which is responsible for ensuring or at least working with the Permanent Secretary to ensure that we are conforming with all the instructions of the Comptroller of Accounts and the Internal Audit will report to the Permanent Secretary on any instances of breach, any instances of weaknesses and it would be the Permanent Secretary's role to put things in place, put systems in place, to ensure that we treat with those weaknesses and eliminate as far as possible as well as to treat with whatever breaches that may arise.

We have heading our Finance and Accounts Unit, we have a director of Finance and Accounts and we have accounting executives, we have accountants as well as the Accounting Assistant. Their roles are very clear and there are checks and balances within that system in the accounting unit. Likewise in the Internal Audit, they are also very clear about their role to ensure that the Ministry, by extension—well, the Permanent Secretary—is running the Ministry the way it is supposed to be run concerning our receipts and expenditure.

The Internal Audit would give us a work plan of what areas they are auditing. That plan has to be approved before they proceed. If anything comes along during the course of the year that would prevent them from working with that plan, those variations are also brought to the PS's attention and we work accordingly. But the system is in place that Accounts is very aware of what—the persons in Accounts are very aware of what their roles are.

There are checks and balances within the accounting unit and we have internal audit which will assist the Permanent Secretary to ensure that that system is working properly and to highlight any instances which would require an intervention from the Permanent Secretary. In which case, we have to do it because, as you said, it is public funds and I have a responsibility to ensure that the Ministry operates within the law, expends the funds as required, as allocated, and that we are literally not breaking the law. I do not know if you want me to elaborate anymore.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I will ask you some follow-up questions and those may allow you to indicate different things that you may not have introduced in this response. Now, one of the things you mentioned was the Internal Auditor and what we have found in examining accounts of other Ministries, because we have done about six of them over the last several months, and we have now done the report, so we kind of appreciate what are some of the issues. We have found that internal auditing in most Ministries is extremely weak. It is something that the Auditor General has complained about and it is something that the examination of the individual Ministries tell us that it is a fact.

So, for the financial year 2015, for instance, the internal audit review was not provided in any of the documents examined at the time of audit in November 2015. It was explained that the Internal Audit Unit had been involved in the verification of arrears due to public servants and that they could not complete their work programme and so on. What is the situation with internal audit in your Ministry? For instance, do you have enough staff? Can it function as it is supposed to function? Can it do the work that is required of it, which is really to be an internal watchdog of income and expenditure and the management of public money in the Ministry, and how can we help you to ensure that you have an effective and functioning and, in a very deliberate way, internal auditing unit?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Chair, we will accept that our internal auditing unit which probably comprises around 22 persons, we have some vacancies which means, of course, we are not up to full strength. But we do have competent officers who try their best to do the job of the Internal Audit Unit. We are of the view that we may have some clerks who probably are getting tied up with more administrative functions and what we would need is probably more technical officers with the appropriate competencies to be able to do the job for this Ministry. We have made representations to our HR Unit and on to the Public Service Commission to have our positions filled; unfortunately, with a limited level of success thus far.

We have a lot of actors in the unit; however, our Auditor III is really doing her best to try and get the work done. In which case, we have do sampling. We have sub-accounting units so we have to deal with those as well, and as I said, over the years, we may have had to deal with arrears for thousands of public officers and teachers and it did hamper the work of the internal audit. We got that sorted out a couple of years ago so now we are down to what I would say the regular work of an internal audit and yes, we do not have enough staff but we are doing our best to do what we need to do.

Mr. Chairman: So a strengthened staff would allow for a more effective internal auditing function. Would you say that?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Yes, it would.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Now, besides the internal auditing overall, I mean there are many units and subunits in any organization like a Ministry. What can you do in the meantime, let us say over a next year, to ensure accountability and transparency in the small accounting unit so that you do not end up with a big problem at some point? So that as you manage these in a decentralized fashion, you also take into account the overall efficiency and effectiveness and the management of money in the Ministry. Can internal audit play a role in that in relation to the accounting officers who are in charge of these units?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: I was just clarifying. Yes, Internal Audit would audit the sub-accounting units. Now, our sub-accounting units are headed by pretty senior officers in the accounting stream. So what we expect is that the senior officers in charge of the sub-accounting units and we have them in the schools, in the secondary schools—and we have 40 primary schools and we have 85 secondary schools—and the heads of those sub-accounting units, as you say, have their roles to do and the Internal Audit audits the work of that sub-accounting unit.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Are all your sub-accounting units only in schools or do you have departments within the Ministry that also have these?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: We have in the district offices and we have in the RCLRC, which is Rudranath Capildeo Learning Resource Centre, as well as the Examinations Unit and now with Scholarships and Advanced Training Division. We have a small one at ECIAF, which is very small.

Mr. Chairman: But do you take my point that if we manage these subunits effectively, I mean you would not likely to end up with a big problem?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Yes, Sir, I accept that.

Mr. Chairman: And one final question before I move on to MP Ayanna Webster-Roy, there were certain things flagged in the Auditor General's Report which you might say are issues he saw as pervasive issues. These relate to your Ministry but there are also things that we might find in other Ministries but we are focusing on your Ministry today. He flagged issues like inventory control, lease agreements, contractual agreements, contract employment, storage of payment vouchers, overpayments, outstanding commitments, cases of theft and losses reported and some instances of void cheques. Now, these things have happened and, I mean, it is one thing to flag them but how can we ensure that these things do not continue, that they do not persist, that if mistakes happen or supervision was not as tight as it needed to be, that it can be corrected, that it can be rectified going forward.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: I was writing down some of the issues you raised. So we are talking about inventory, lease agreements, contract agreements. We have put things in place with inventory because we have a listing of the inventory which we have to update as we go along. We are aware of that. With respect to the lease agreements, however, the Ministry does not have ultimate responsibility for the preparation of those lease agreements. The procedure is such that we would have to go through what is now the property management section of the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications. There is a procedure of going to Cabinet to get approval for the rental or lease of the property and thereafter the lease agreement is prepared, not by the Ministry. So as any other Ministry, we are caught up in that system in which we really have no control of the timing of the preparation of the lease agreement. But as far as possible, as soon as it is ready, we have it on hand so that if audit comes in, we can make it available.

Contract agreements, if we are talking specifically employment contracts, those agreements are supposed to be prepared by—

Mr. Chairman: CPO.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: No, not the CPO, sorry. Some years ago, it would have been—well, we were given a template on how to prepare an actual agreement so once the terms are fixed by the CPO, the Ministry's Legal Unit can prepare it.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Before that, those agreements had to be prepared by the Chief State Solicitor's Department and that certainly was causing a delay because all the Ministries' contract employment, those agreements had to be prepared by that section of the AG's office. So since that is now in the hands of the Ministry, it makes it a little easier, but when we are dealing with thousands of persons on contract, we could have a little delay in getting it and it depends on the size of the Legal Unit in the Ministry. Right now, we have two persons in the Legal Unit in the Ministry so that could contribute to the delays in the preparation of those contract employment, those agreements.

Storage: yes, we had an issue with storage and we probably will continue to have an issue with storage because literally, as I said, we are dealing with thousands, over 22,000 persons. Trying to keep vouchers for that quantity will always be a question of space. We now have a vault, yes, but we have to accept that it might not be large enough to hold our records so that we are looking for alternative sites. But it is an issue of volume and lack of space with that but we are working on that right now.

Overpayments: it has been an issue with the Ministry of Education and we accept that. We have put systems in place in our HR unit to treat with minimizing and—make sure that we reduce it—to reduce those instances of overpayments. Because, as I said, we are dealing with schools across Trinidad, well, over 100 schools. We go through, yes, the district offices but the information has to come from the school to the district office to the Ministry of Education, and we all know by the time that happens, we could be paying someone who might be on leave.

We have put in place some new systems in HR. We have issued circulars to the effect of what the new system would be because we are aware that overpayment is an issue, and we have utilized technology where we are now allowing certificates, applications for leave to be emailed to the Ministry so we can start working on it while we wait for hard copies to come in. We have accepted that they can contact the Ministry to give us information so that we could try to avoid overpayments from occurring.

And, of course, we treat with overpayments as we would. If we have arrears of any—any funds that we would have in arrears for the officers, if there is an overpayment, in accordance with the circular, we will recover. So we accept that we had an issue and it is still an issue but we are working on it and we have put systems in place to reduce it to as far a minimum, as best we can.

Thefts, loss, and void cheques: the issue that was flagged in the report was that we were not stamping "void" on the cheques. Rest assured we are stamping "void" on the cheques so that issue should not be happening unless, as I say, simple, just maybe an error, one or two cases, but certainly we have put that system in place.

Well, theft and loss, as I say, that is usually—could be picked up with audit. Most of it, sorry to say, might be in the schools but we are working on that as well. We have continuous meetings with principals reminding them of their role and responsibility within their plant, and we have also security on site at the schools. Right now, we are using MTS. We have some other security firms so that our schools, we are trying our best to see how secure we can make our schools. It is a large bill to pay but it is something we have to do because we cannot afford for the theft and loss to continue to increase.

So, given the size of the Ministry, we will still have some challenges in some of the areas but we are trying our best to put things in place to minimize.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Just a quick follow-up question. I mean, would not effective automation and software systems and, you know, good application of computer use, would not those things solve some of the problems here? I mean, all the record-keeping issues, the HR issues, the overpayment issues. I mean, how far are you from managing an effectively automated system that would allow you to be more efficient and effective in this area? I mean, I would think that for the Ministry of Education, given the fact that you deal with all of these establishments with literally thousands of schoolchildren and different plants in different places, this would be an absolute necessity.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Chair, I smile because I know we are trying to get the Ministry, as far as possible, to be automated. We have some schools really—some are in a better position than others—to use technology to get information to us. But then we also have the challenge that in accordance with the legislation, there are just some things that we have not reached that stage as yet. Let us put it that way. We still have to stick with the paper and accounting has not—there are certain parts of it that is still very paper-based, so it is difficult to automate everything.

But what can be automated and the schools who have the technology and staff to utilize it properly have been doing it as far as I am aware and I think that is why we were in a position to institute the submission of things via email and well, there is always phone call and fax, so that we are no longer depending so heavily on feet and cars to collect things from the school, get to the district office and then for the school supervisors to get it to the Ministry. So as far as we can, we have automated but there are still some instances where we cannot in accordance with the legislation.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, I will ask MP Webster-Roy to continue the questioning.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Good afternoon and thank you, Mr. Chairman. The issue of record keeping would affect a number of different areas, and one area is pension and leave because, as an MP, I have a lot of people coming to me with that particular issue. So I know you would have had delays in your Ministry, so what would have been some of the factors contributing to those delays?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: There are two units that would be dealing basically with pension and leave records. We would have to get the information from HR and then it would be prepared by the pension and leave persons, audited, and then signed off to go down to Comptroller of Accounts. Ultimate payment is still not in our hands, it would be the Comptroller of Accounts.

However, over the period that we are speaking of, the Ministry unfortunately had some issues with building, some OSHA issues, and therefore, the Ministry, a major part of the Ministry, was functioning five hours a day. In some cases, some might be four and we are talking about over two years. The accounts as well—so HR would have been working shortened hours and, as I say, I understand it is at least two years we are talking about, as well as accounts. So given our sheer numbers with shortened days, we did have a backlog and we are trying right now because we have moved and we are in better conditions and we are now working a full day to try and pick up with those sets of backlog, but I accept, we did have an issue with that.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: The records that you would have submitted to Comptroller of Accounts, how many have been processed?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: That would be a difficult thing for—

Mrs. Webster-Roy: I think from the records from the Auditor General, you would have submitted, I think, 586 during that period.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: The period '14/'15?

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Yeah, 586 would have been submitted.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: I will have to get that information because I cannot say at this point in time how much of that 556 would have been processed to date.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Okay. So in terms of the communication with persons who are waiting, what would usually transpire? Would the Ministry keep in contact and say well, we are at this stage, you should expect something at X, Y, Z date? What is usually the process?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Usually the individuals come in and we give them a feedback, the status of their matter. If it is at Comptroller of Accounts, they would be informed and really and truly, it would be out of our hands at that point. We are responsible for getting that document prepared and sent down to Comptroller and that is within our control. As I say, we had issues with it. But all we can tell the officer, when they come in, is what stage it is at. Whether we are still working with it within the Ministry and we have been trying, as I say, to shorten that process, but once it leaves the Ministry, the most we can tell an individual is that we have sent it down to Comptroller of Accounts and maybe even share with them what month and year and at that point, it is really in the Comptroller's hands.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Is there advocacy on behalf of the individuals, the Ministry following up with Comptroller and, you know, trying to advocate to ensure—because I know of persons who would have gone home and waiting patiently to the point where they died. I mean, it is not fair you would have given your life to service and then at the end, you cannot get what is your due. But is there any active advocacy on behalf of the individuals by the Ministry?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Now, the officers in HR would follow up, eh, but I cannot say that they would follow up in every single case. I would not be able to say that but we try to follow up particularly the ones where persons, we would have sent down the documents maybe years ago. Now, if we send a document last month, I do not know that we would be following up but if we know we sent something two and three years ago and the person has not been paid as yet, yes, we will follow up on those cases.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Another issue that comes up is errors in terms of the documents going forward and omissions. How trained are the people at the Pension and Leave Unit and is there a training plan to ensure that as officers change, they know how to do the job, they understand the desk and they are able to send the documents in without the errors and omissions and thus delaying the process even more?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: What I can say is that we have some seasoned public officers in that unit. In fact, they were brought back on contract because they would have been very familiar with the relevant circulars from CPO's office, Comptroller, whoever. So that we have a fair amount of expertise now to treat with pension and leave so it is flowing a little faster. And I cannot say—I have not seen in my time so many cases coming back with errors; however, that is the situation now. During the period in question, I would probably have to find out how many persons we had and the level of competence.

But it really is a case of persons being familiar with old circulars dealing with increments, salary conversion, that kind of thing. A new person coming in really needs to be properly trained because you are looking at something going back. So the seasoned officers, I think, do a better job at it, but if we get new officers in the unit, yes, we have to train them and usually it is under—the more senior persons in the unit would do the training because of their familiarity with the area.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: You have a full complement of staff in that unit now, taking into consideration the contracted staff you brought in?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: I will admit no, we are not up to the size we should be.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Is there any plan to recruit?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Our recruiting, as I say, because we are looking at seasoned people, it would really be trying to get in persons on contract who knew the system. Anytime we get the new persons, as I say, we will have the learning curve of getting them up to scratch. So if we get public officers, then yes, we will have to do the training internally but if we have positions, and we do have a couple, the plan is to fill those positions with contract employees who would know the job and will be able to hit the ground running.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Any time frame as to when you may consider—

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: As far as I recall, we have a Note to go to Cabinet to create—well, to allow for us to employ persons on contract into pension and leave positions. Again, as you might be aware, it is not just a Note straight to Cabinet, it has to go to our PMCD, which is the Public Management Consulting Division of the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications and all the Ministries have to go through that process. So it is difficult to give a timeline on when that Note will be ready to go to Cabinet. Once we have the approval, it would be a case of advertising, shortlisting, interview, selection.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: My final question. In terms of the advocacy, do you intend to have somebody assigned specifically to liaising with the Comptroller of Accounts and giving feedback to those persons who would have served and now looking forward to their pension?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Usually, it works better when the individuals go and make their case and individuals do go once they hear that we have sent it on. We will have to put something in place to say that we will have to assign someone. I am not sure we are at the point where we can literally take someone off a schedule and assign them to deal with follow-up once it goes to Comptroller. But as I say, the cases that come across our desk where the persons are waiting for years, we will do that on those individual cases and maybe if we get additional staff, we could look to see if that could become a part of the HR function to follow up on these issues, but at this point in time, I am sorry, we cannot. We do not have the capacity to do it.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: I would like you to consider that because too many people are out there crying. And, I mean, I am young but on behalf of all of those who would have served, I would really like you to consider that, please.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Yes.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Thanks.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: As I say, our role is to prepare the document to Comptroller and we will try and follow up but it is out of our hands.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Even though the individual would go, it is always good to have that extra voice advocating on their behalf as well.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: We will try our best.

Miss Raffoul: Thank you. Thank you for all your answers so far, I really appreciate them. I have a question. You were saying that regarding automation and putting into place technology that would help to kind of streamline processes and payments, that one of the problems is legislation that does not currently support that. Can you say which pieces of legislation specifically would be needed to be amended so that we can help with that?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Okay. Maybe my Director of Finance and Accounts could go into it in a little more detail but there are pay record cards and those kinds of things, just right now, cannot go—well, my information is it cannot be automated, but I will ask Mr. Mungal if he could go into a little more details on that matter. Thank you.

Mr. Mungal: Most of the records under the Finance and Accounts department, for example the pay record cards, the vouchers and things like that, all those things are under the financial regulations that have to be kept and an original is what is supposed to be kept. Hence, those things have to remain original and stored. For example, a pay record card is supposed to be kept for up to 60 years. So 60 years of a pay record card for about 20,000 people will be a very large amount and it is growing every year. So to keep it, space is what is the problem.

Same thing goes for the vouchers. But in the case of the vouchers, most likely, it is around seven years to keep some of those records. But again, it is a large institution which creates a lot of documents in a year which, again, comes back to the problem with space. So if it is that it is legislated that you could automate in the sense of scanning and keeping it on a computerized system, because when the auditor comes and asks for an original, you are supposed to produce the original. Right? So those are the kind of hiccups you have on it.

Miss Raffoul: Do you know specifically the names of the pieces of the legislation so we can look into this?

Mr. Mungal: One of them I could tell you off the bat is the financial regulations; that would be the Exchequer and Audit Act which has the financial regulations and the financial instructions.

Miss Raffoul: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Any more questions, Senator?

Miss Raffoul: I do have one more question. Regarding impact and efficiency of spending, how does the Ministry approach partnering on contracts with private sector entities—NGOs, charities—to help with service delivery?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Well, we have many stakeholders. There would be NGOs and private enterprise who might be interested in contributing in some form or fashion and usually they would approach the school. Sometimes you get the request to the Ministry but a school in a particular area, you might find the businesses in that area might be willing to give some level of support, so they approach the school. But the process is it would still come to the Ministry to get sign-off on whether we would engage in that kind of partnership where some funding is concerned.

Mr. Deoraj, who is our Director of School Supervision, could probably go into a little more of over the years what kind of partnerships we may have gotten into and which might still be ongoing at this point in time. Mr. Deoraj.

Mr. Deoraj: Thank you, PS. Good afternoon, Senator. What happens really is that a lot of schools are approached by corporate entities to run particular programmes within the school environment. We are right now in the height of rolling out school-based management at schools and part of that, of course, is engaging stakeholders in the community and outside the community. So if you look at RBC, for example, with their young leaders, they have engaged schools over a long period of time. We have spelling bee competitions from other entities, we have homework centres that schools engage with private enterprise. So that this stakeholder engagement is a keen component of the relationship between the school and private entities but it is not national that you would have a company coming in and going to all the schools for one reason or the other. To a large extent, we have a lot of localized assistance being offered to schools. We do have like Integrity Commission from the other Ministries that will engage the schools.

So that on a private enterprise basis, we have engagement. If you look at the east west—not the East-West Corridor, the north coast, for example, and BP and their engagement with the schools on the north coast, they have invested a lot of money in trying to bring those schools up to scratch in terms of participation and in terms of equity and so on. So, we do have a lot of engagement from private enterprise but it is more localized rather than national.

Mr. Samuel: Good afternoon, again. I want to piggyback on what the Chair first raised with regard to internal audit as well as asking a question and I will ask that first. With regard to the recommended structure of the Ministry, how many legal officers are you entitled to?—because you said you have two in such a large Ministry.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Right now, we have two Legal Officers II, a Legal Officer I and two APs in the unit. When I came in in 2016, there was a senior legal officer. We have a position right now of director that we could fill but right now, two Ministries joined up, so that we have to review that structure. At the time, the structure probably was just a senior legal, two Legal Officers II, they had a legal researcher and the APs can come or go as—sorry to say, APs are Associate Professionals who are returning scholars. We can assign them to the Legal Unit once they have that training.

As I say, right now, because we are looking at two Ministries merged, we have to review the unit and certainly we need a director and we probably need more than one senior legal officer. But as it is now, as I say, we have two Legal Officers II and a Legal Officer I.

Mr. Samuel: And the reason I asked that, I am quite concerned with the long-term impact of our present and past deficiencies and the longer we take to get it right, the worse it becomes. With that in mind, I know we are looking at the 2014/2015 report but is your present operations any different from then? Has it significantly improved? Is it better than it was from a standpoint of the succession planning of the Ministry? If it is expected to get worse, meaning that if people are not being replaced or hired in the time frame they should be, what you encounter is that people are retiring. People's contracts are expiring and you could find yourself in probably a worse situation than you were in 2014 in 2017.

First of all, is it worse? Is it going to get worse? Do you have an idea of the amount of people that are close to retirement, will be off the list in a year, two years, three years, four years, five years? Do you understand the amount of people whose contracts are going to expire within the next year or five years? And what is being done to ensure that there is not a void and we find ourselves worse off? Do we have that kind of mechanism in place to ensure that we are here?

Do we write the CPO and all the entities in the Ministry of Public Administration five years in advance and say, look, in five years from now, we have 25 persons of a certain level who are going to approach retirement, they are going to be retiring? Could we set in train a mechanism to ensure that before these people move on, there is a set of people that can tap into their expertise and then as they move on, the people who are coming in would have rubbed shoulders with them before they leave? Are we planning those kinds of things? Are we looking into those things in advance or are we kind of hitting and hoping that these people do not die on the job or do not retire too soon or if they retire, we could probably ask them to stay on a little longer and stuff like that? But what are the preparations to ensure that it does not get worse? And that is my question.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: It is basically an HR issue which, as I say, maybe I can ask my DPS in charge of HR to get into. However, before we go there, when we are dealing with the public officers, oh, we know when they are going to be retiring. I mean, we cannot avoid a certain age. However, when we make requests for positions to be filled, because we have to depend on the Service Commissions, the most we can do in the meantime is put someone, the most senior person to act. Again, we have no control when the Public Service Commission will fill the position permanently.

With respect to the contract employment, yes, we know because that is a definite period. We would know when a contract is coming to an end and we would be able to go—we have been going more than six months in advance when contracts are coming to an end to get approval to hire persons again on contract. As I say, that has to go to PMCD and again, they probably have staffing issues as well and just we do not get it back in time. So we ended up having to put certain arrangements in place which we know are not the best arrangements in the world.

We also have an issue of funding because as much as we may like to hire persons on contract, particularly this year, our funding has been reduced substantially. So even that avenue, which as I say, over the last few years, might have been the way you could go if you cannot get the positions filled from the Public Service Commission, that we have a little issue with that right now but that was helping over the last few years. So yes, we can say we know when persons are going to retire if we are looking at natural compulsory retirement. We have that listing. We know what positions they are in and therefore, we can ask for the positions to be filled. We certainly are proactive in asking for it to be filled with an actor because that is an easier—it is a shorter process.

We could go with the most senior person on the establishment.

But sometimes we—and that can work for positions that are unique to the Ministry of Education. However, if you are looking at a clerk or a research officer, which is across the board, while we can put interim arrangements in place to put the most senior person in the Ministry to act, that position is not going to necessarily be filled by that individual.

1.00p.m.

So, there are some challenges where that is concerned. We are trying to work it as best as we can. But we now have the additional issue of funding restricting us a little bit with going the way of contract employment, which has been helping over the last few years.

Mr. Samuel: I probably would ask my cadre of questions. I recognize that in the report there was no evidence of site visits being made by officials of the Ministry to any of the project samples or that the projects were monitored to ensure successful completion or adherence to agreed terms and regulations. What is the reason for this? How does the Ministry plan to ensure that there is value for money for funds expended on these types of projects? That is the first question I want to ask.

The second question is, I recognize that on an annual basis there is a great deal of expenditure to replace furniture at schools, what is the cause of this? Is it getting worse, based upon indiscipline of students, the major cause of destruction? Because I myself visit schools and there are times in the backyard of schools, a pile of furniture that has been destroyed by students' violence, whatever situation, how are we dealing with that? Because it is an expenditure on an annual basis. How are we dealing with that type of expenditure? Or how do we curb on it from a discipline standpoint in the schools? That is the second question.

My third question is based on the transportation system, meaning the contractual arrangement between, I think, is it PTSC and the maxi-taxi people? Fortunately for me, I live in an area and I visit areas on the north coast and stuff like that. I remember there were times when I myself stood and wondered "how dey still have dat maxi-taxi on de road", because of the condition of the vehicle that the children have to travel in? As a matter of fact, I ventured on one just to peep inside it to see what the condition is, and from inside you can see the road, not through the windows, but I mean through the floor and stuff like that, and some students pointed it out to me.

I remember communicating with certain officials. I do not know if anything was done, but that is the situation I saw. I want to know what is put in place to ensure, by the Ministry, that these things do not reoccur and that the conditions of the transportation contracted by the Ministry, through the relevant authorities, is really up to the standard that you want?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Okay. Can I go with the furniture first? I think we have to admit that we do not get furniture made the way they used to be made.

Mr. Samuel: "But we doh get children made de way dey used to—"

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: We do not get furniture made the way they used to be made in my time in school. But, because they have bonded contractors, we have very little wriggle room to choose probably another firm who may do a better job at producing the furniture. So we are limited with what is in the contract book, as we put it, where we have to go to X contractor and the quality may not be at the standard we would like.

I would not like to say that the children have—yes the children have changed over the years, Mr. Samuel, but I do not know they have changed to the point that they are mashing up furniture willy-nilly. Things happen in schools and furniture over time will depreciate and we will have a little graveyard of furniture in the back of the school. We go through the Board of Survey and we would go through what is unserviceable pieces of furniture and we go through the process through Central Tenders Board to deal with those disposal.

But I think it comes back to the quality of the furniture that we might be getting now. They do not seem to last as long as the ones when I was in school. We would not go into how long ago that was.

Mr. Samuel: If I may ask a question on what you said. Is there not a possibility that if for some reason—I am just asking—through some violent means, indiscipline action, children destroy furniture, should there not be a clause in the education system that would cause the parents to pay for the furniture? I am just asking. The same way if I drive on the road and I had an accident and destroyed a T&TEC light pole or something, there is some kind of charge for that.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: My understanding is maybe at the school level, if you have an altercation and there is some damage to a piece of furniture and it is absolutely clear who is responsible for such damage we could do it at the level, probably deal with the parent or the guardian to impress on them that there might be a little obligation to replace said furniture. But to say—but then it comes down to if they can afford it because you know not everybody can afford it.

So it is going to go through a case of being absolutely 100 per cent sure that you can say student X or Y was responsible for destroying a piece furniture and, therefore, that student, and by extension parents and guardian, will be responsible for the replacement. That could be a little difficult. But as I say, I am sure the Ministry will not object if a parent chooses to replace a piece of furniture that might have been damaged in an altercation. But as I come back to the original question of the furniture, we may have no control of who we get the furniture from. All right?

With respect to the site visits to our projects, the Ministry has two divisions who would normally get involved with our construction projects, even our repair programme. We have an Educational Facilities Planning and Procurement Division and we have the Educational Planning Division. There was a time when we had teams made up of persons from each division who would go out to your projects to do our monitoring of the projects. Over time we have gotten into many, many, many projects and with EFCL who is our project managers, they have a responsibility to do that monitoring. We would do it on our education, because as you say we are looking at value for money. Over time we may not have been able to keep up with the team visiting each site.

We also have an issue with staff constraints in both of those divisions. So yes, in the period ’14/’15; ’13/’14 yes, we would have had those teams in place doing the visits. Over time we may not have been keep to keep up with each project being visited. We have agreed that we are going back to that arrangement where we will go out, even though EFCL is the project manager who is supposed to have consultants, paying consultants to manage these jobs, paying clerks of work to manage the job. Because it is government funds, we have a responsibility so we have reinstituted those site visits. We have an engineer on board now who would accompany, as best as possible to ensure value for money, to ensure that what we are being invoiced is properly invoiced and to ensure that the works are up to standard. So we are putting that system back in place.

We will accept that maybe over the last year we were not able to do it as best as we would like but we will be putting it in place and have more regular meetings with the EFCL. We get monthly reports. We will have more monthly meetings to go through those reports, as I say, with our persons from the Ministry going on the visits and bringing reports to us.

Transport: now, the arrangement with PTSC, Mr. Deoraj could give us more information on it. However, our arrangement is with PTSC and PTSC hires the maxi-taxis. PTSC has a responsibility to ensure that the maxi taxis do not have see-through floors, or whatever else they may have. So that really our arrangement is with PTSC. PTSC has the arrangement with the maxis but I hear your point and Mr. Deoraj would go into a little more of what our roles are, the Ministry of Education and PTSC, in relation to the maxi taxis.

Mr. Deoraj: Thank you, PS. With regard to PTSC, we do operate with an agreement with PTSC but PTSC has its own rigour of choosing maxi-taxis, the quality of the maxi-taxis and the drivers. There is a complete regiment of processes that the PTSC goes through. In fact, one of their documents that I have before me under section 22.3.1 speaks to the monitoring of the maxi-taxis and the condition thereof and every annual check that that vehicle must go through. If there are cases where some of these maxis are operating, as you said, where the roadworthiness of these vehicles are subject to question, then those reports should be sent to the Ministry of Education and we can pick it up with PTSC and ask them to account.

There is the second dimension of the private transport, as you know. They are now painted in a particular colour and licensed in a particular way. They fall directly under the licensing system with the licensing authority, but also through PTSC there is a relationship with them, but they are licensed to transport children on a private basis and falls under licensing authority. We are concerned only with the PTSC concessionaires and when we look at their documentation, in terms of the depth and rigour of their processes, the Ministry is comfortable with that relationship at the moment. However, if there are cases where the roadworthiness of the vehicles are in question we should be informed so that we can act on it immediately.

Mr. Chairman: Would you proceed, Sen. Henry, and I would ask you to follow after.

Dr. Henry: Thank you very much, Chair. I want to start off with some basics and get to slightly more interesting things after. But, what is the size of the Ministry of Education, in terms of full-time employees? I mean, just to gauge the kind of management issue we are dealing with.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: At this point in time, or the time ’14/’15 and ’13/’14?

Dr. Henry: Both, if you have.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Well, I could give you around ’15, we were dealing with 2,788 civil servants, 15,584 teaching staff. We had 1,735 contract employees and 25 daily-rated employees. The figures are higher in relation to the civil servants, right now we are into 4,000-plus; teaching staff is about 14,415; and our contract staff right now is a little lower. It is about 1,136.

Dr. Henry: Okay. Could you repeat the figure for the daily-paid?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Twenty-five in around 2015. We are now at 35.

Dr. Henry: Thirty-five?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Yes.

Dr. Henry: Okay. Just give me a quick idea, what do daily-paid people do? These are like cleaners and stuff?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: No, we have labourers and drivers and we have a few at ECIAF really running the farming activities, so they would cut grass and feed the animals, et cetera.

Dr. Henry: Okay. You mentioned a while ago about the security bill for school maintenance and protection. Do you have any figures on that? What is the cost?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Yes, we have that information. Just give us one second, please. In 2015, our allocation and expenditure would have been $185,725,000. The actual expenditure for that year was $172,459,553.45 to be exact. We should be able to tell you a figure for 2014 in a minute, Sir.

Dr. Henry: While you are looking, this primarily goes towards the MTS Company, or is it a variety of companies?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: We have a variety of security firms providing security services for us. It is just that MTS is the largest.

Dr. Henry: Okay.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: I have the figure for '14.

Dr. Henry: Go ahead, yeah.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Allocated, $165,810,000; and we spent $165,713,420.48.

Dr. Henry: And this roughly covers about 200 schools, both primary and—?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Security would be for the schools as well as the properties of the Ministry of Education.

Ms. Henry-David: Security would be for the 85 government secondary schools and for all 444 government primary schools, as well as some early childhood centres, as well as the Ministry at its various locations at the time.

Dr. Henry: Is there any process where the Ministry might be trying to reduce this cost? I mean this is a very, very high, a big number, you know.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: It is difficult to say that we want to reduce it when we have instances of theft and loss. We have a lot of early childhood care centres that we need to make sure our children are secured. We have all those schools that we have responsibility for, and as Mr. Samuel said, we have a different environment—children and the community—to deal with now. So it is difficult to say that we would be able to find a way to reduce this bill, especially when this cost was based on the 2008 rate. So we are going out shortly to tender and we expect that it would be higher.

Dr. Henry: Okay. But does the Ministry have any links with the police service? Because where does the police come in, in protecting our schools and so on? They play no role?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Community police, yes. We have a close relationship with the community police in areas. You would have heard recently where we are really and truly involved with them. Mr. Deoraj, as school supervision, could go into more details at that, with our relationship with the police service, in particular community police.

Mr. Deoraj: Thank you, PS. With regard to the community police, we have been given the names of the person who is in charge of community police in every district. So there is a close relationship with all the schools and the community police. They play an active role, not only in visiting the schools for any incident but they also visit the schools to talk about discipline and what is required and that kind of thing, to students. So, besides that, we also have the Police Youth Club that is active in most of our schools.

We have a direct link with the head of all these divisions and they meet on occasion with the Ministry of Education. So the community policing is working for the schools, but at the school level, given the present climate, the number of theft and loss by district, it is difficult to reduce, especially in particular communities, the number of officers we have on duty protecting the schools.

Dr. Henry: Okay. Thank you. My next question has to do with an article I saw in the *Newsday* a couple of weeks ago about issues with schools getting funding on time. I think it was somebody from the union had written the article. Could anyone clarify what that was about? It was about funding being disbursed late.

Mr. Mungal: Was it related to primary schools or secondary schools?

Dr. Henry: Secondary schools.

Mr. Mungal: Funding usually comes when you make a request from the Budget Division, Ministry of Finance. Now, usually we give funding to the secondary schools for each term. So it is three times for the school year. We make the request from the Ministry of Finance, Budget Division, for the release of funds to how much we anticipate we would pay for each term. In this year we had gotten the funding in late November month. By the time we prepared and submitted, some schools had collected it in early December and some had collected it in late December. But funding for the schools had been given and it had been collected since December month.

Dr. Henry: Okay. So, in terms of, leading up to the auditing there was no issue with—it was just a delay on the part of the Ministry or was it something else that was going on, in terms of the auditing and accountability issues?

Mr. Mungal: Auditing.

Dr. Henry: I mean accountability—well, meaning that, was there some issue with schools not submitting reports, or—?

Mr. Mungal: During the financial year the schools were supposed to report back to the Ministry every month on a return of how much they spent. That is something we always have a problem with from the school, because when we have to submit that information—remember, we have to give back budget every month as a return statement of what we spent from what we had got. When we do not get back the information, the information goes back to the Ministry showing that, under the school, money has not been spent. For example, we might get about $35million for the first term. Right? When you are sending back a return showing $20 million still unspent, because the school is not sending you back the return or what they had spent so far, it hampers the next release and we keep trying to get them to do that. We write them. We talk to them. Many things we try with them and yet it still falls back with the same problem.

Dr. Henry: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Do you have any follow-up?

Dr. Henry: Go ahead. No.

Mr. Chairman: I will go on now to MP Ayanna Webster-Roy. I had intended to stop at 1.30 p.m., but what I will do, I will allow for one question from each member as we close and I would like the Auditor General's Office to just make some comments on what they have heard today, if they would like to make any inputs. Okay? Go ahead.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Thank you, Chair. I want to go back to that PTSC issue because it left me very troubled. Right? Senator raised the issue of safety and you would have alluded to the fact that there is a contract with PTSC and they would then subcontract, but what is the Ministry doing to ensure that the contract you awarded to PTSC is being executed in a manner that would ensure the safety of your clients, the students?

I looked at the Auditor General's Report and they noted that over $47million was spent in that period but they could not find the register of contracts. So that would have contributed to some problems, in terms of their reporting. I want to know PS, what are you doing to address that particular situation? And two, what do you intend to do, in terms of monitoring and evaluating to ensure that the contract you gave to PTSC is being executed in such a manner that your students are safe when they are travelling on the roads, please?

Mr. Deoraj: With regard to the contract between the Ministry of Education and PTSC, we are presently working on a—we have the draft of the contract to be signed with PTSC so that it has been completed at the Ministry end. We have to send it to the PTSC attorneys for their comment and hopefully we will try to get that signed in the shorter, rather than longer period. In it we have set our specific obligations of the PTSC and the expectations of the Ministry of Education. So once that contract is signed, we should be on a better footing, in terms of enforcement.

In terms of monitoring and evaluation of the service, as it is right now we depend on PTSC getting their drivers and their vehicles in the roadworthy condition and the vetting of their drivers with their regiment of process that they choose the drivers. We depend on PTSC.

In terms of monitoring, we pay by the number of trips that a PTSC concessionaire will do per day. We have instituted a system to verify that the number of trips have been made because we depend on that information to present when to verify for their payment.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Is that the system where you see the men and women on the road checking as they pass?

Mr. Deoraj: We pay by trips, so we do not pay by the number of students actually accessing—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Webster-Roy: No.

Mr. Deoraj: We have the safety officers at schools who would help us with verifying that the number of trips have been made. We have had some discussions with PTSC. They also have field officers that will help us verify the number of trips that have been made.

Mr. Chairman: Sen. Samuel, any follow-up?

Mr. Samuel: Just one question on the issue of fraud.

Mr. Chairman: You okay? You did not get a proper answer?

Mrs. Webster-Roy: No. I am still—

Mr. Chairman: I do not think Mrs. Webster-Roy is satisfied with the answer. Can you give something a little more elaborate that will help to satisfy her?

Mrs. Webster-Roy: I am still troubled because—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Perhaps not elaborate but pointed.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Yeah, please.

Mr. Deoraj: Specifically to the monitoring?

Mrs. Webster-Roy: I am still uncomfortable with that.

Mr. Deoraj: From the Ministry of Education we are dependent on the checking at the schools so that the number of trips that is done by PTSC, that is what we pay for. We have the safety officers who would verify but we do not have a particular person outside that will verify that these are the number of trips that the maxi passed this particular way.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Might I add, we would depend, I think, more on the principals who are seeing these maxis and probably, as I say, the safety officers who are at the schools who can check the maxis. Because, as I say, you can probably look at a maxi outside and see if a maxi is looking roadworthy. But a little more than that will be required. As Mr. Deoraj said, we do not have anyone at head office in the Ministry. We expect that the schools, with the transport, come into the schools on a daily basis, would be able to raise red flags with us if there are issues with a particular maxi or maxis. But we really do not have the capacity at the Ministry level to go and do that.

Anyhow you take it, it is expected that if PTSC contracted the maxis, as I say, they would have gone through a procedure of making sure that the maxis are safe for our children and roadworthy. So we really rely on PTSC to do their part. As Mr. Deoraj said, while it might not have been written in black and white before, it will be exactly what PTSC's role would be, with regard to those maxis and what Ministry's role would be in relation to that.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, MP Webster-Roy wants to know this—try and answer her question—the maxis are being checked up and down, but who is checking on whether the children get to school to get an education, and how do you verify that the trips in fact have to do with the number of children who have to get to school? She wants an answer to that question, which I think is a legitimate and real question.

Mr. Deoraj: How do we end up with a maxi-taxi at the school is the first thing to consider. A principal makes a request that X number of children are coming from this particular area. So we have an idea that there are 15 children coming from this particular location to get to the school. So there is a need. Once we have that need, we would engage PTSC to organize a maxi to travel that particular route and get into school. We can tell you at the end of the week how many children have actually accessed the transport because we have a form and right now we have a monthly report that comes from the schools that tells us how many children use that maxi and how many trips have been made. We have a specific form that the principals fill out at the end of the month and send that information. So we know if there are 15 children in X location, the school is in Y location, they have accessed the transport for the month. That is the system we have. But we do not have a dedicated person that will actually go on the maxi to ensure how many children are on it at any point in time because we pay by trips.

Mr. Chairman: I will go to Sen. Henry and then to Sen. Raffoul and then I will ask the Assistant Auditor and his colleague to make a comment and then I would close up and that is it.

Dr. Henry: Okay. I know I might be diving kind of deep here, but I was told that some recent changes that require principals to get three quotes for spending under $5,000 and that this is becoming a bit of a burden, in terms of running schools on a daily basis. Could you verify if that is true and why? What is going on with that?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: The system of three quotes is not a new system.

Dr. Henry: But with the value under $5,000. That is the part I was told that is new.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: That is not new either. Because if I have to buy something in the Ministry, if it is costing me $100, well that might be a little ridiculous, but $500—for example, I am going to get tea plates and the tea plates are costing $30 a plate, I have to get quotes to see if I want to go with the $30, $35 or $40. The bill might only be $3,000 in the end. The three quotes is not a new system.

I guess, over time and in the past, there might have been a little facility that the Ministry was allowing principals because I guess, of location, they are spread out all over Trinidad, that they gave them that facility. But what we are doing is putting back the original system in place where the three quotes system is in place and they are required to conform to that system.

Dr. Henry: For any limit of any expenditure?

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Yes, you can add.

Dr. Henry: And there is no limit, right?

Mr. Mungal: The three quotes system prior to the previous years, under $5,000 you were allowed to buy without three quotes. However, over the years we have observed what has been happening is that this system started to be abused. Literally, principals were starting to keep it under $5,000, right, and buying things for like $4,900, but they are buying if from one supplier and when you get the invoice, the total invoices state about forty-something thousand dollars, no quotation, none whatsoever. It has been literally abused, directly by the principals taking—they have a project to be done, we would keep it under the $5,000 and give it to this person who they want to give. Right? Coming back to the three quotes system, to cut off this abuse.

Not only that, when a person—they go to one supplier and they get one thing. You notice the price was about four times what you would have gotten by somebody else with no quote, actually, not even a one quote.

We are trying now to bring back what it was, three quotes for everything. Some principals argue the point that if they he had to buy one light bulb. No school would have one light bulb. You are supposed to buy bulbs by the boxes and stock. Because those large schools you have been supplying out there—providing for your school. You have thousands of bulbs. That argument cannot stand. It is just a matter of bringing back what—we want value for money? Quality for money? It is over eighty-something million dollars we give to those 85 secondary schools for a year, in one financial year, and it has really been a lot of abuse going on.

Dr. Henry: Okay. I think eventually you did answer the question.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, Sen. Raffoul, do you have any questions?

Miss Raffoul: I do not have any more questions. I just wanted to express my thanks to the committee for everyone who responded so well to all the questions and gave so much information. Thanks.

Mr. Chairman: Do you have any comments? I mean, all of this was based on your report. The questions have been generated out of that. You have heard the responses of the Ministry of Education within this time frame. Do you have any comments that you would like to make?

Mr. Peters: Thank you Chairman. We recognize that there are some pervasive issues outside the control of the Ministry and these will continue for some time, but we are encouraged by the positive action that the PS has taken in matters where she should control some of these issues and hopefully this can be translated into short-term management letters next time around.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Let us say the question of property management and these issues of contracts not being available when the Auditor General's, basically, intervention is required to write his report.

If you listened to the response there, and it is something that is replicated in other Ministries, the property management initiates it. The Ministry has to wait and until they get that final contract they really cannot provide anything. Would the Auditor General be satisfied with the property management writing to the Ministry, indicating that negotiations have begun with such and such a proprietor for such and such a building and these are likely to conclude by such and such a time, and within the period, arrangements have been made for the Ministry to occupy the building? Would such a document suffice to the Auditor General until the contract is effected?

Mr. Peters: Well the thing is, we really do a compliance audit, compliance with the regulations. What we could probably look at is issue a mitigating statement when we make the comment. Okay? These things were not produced. However, we saw action being taken in that regard.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, okay. The reason I asked the question is that I think it is important, if we are going to address the Auditor General's Report properly and insist on compliance from the Ministry, or the entities, that we separate legitimate issues that have to be attended and things that are just part of the bureaucratic system that does not facilitate timely information and processes that cannot be concluded in a certain way, you know, so that you separate sense from nonsense kind of then. You separate the issues that need to be flagged and need to be pursued and compliance insisted upon, and you separate those from those things that are really part of a bureaucratic system that causes inconvenience or untimeliness of delivery and things like that. That is why I asked the question to find out if we could do this.

Now, I want to thank the members of the Ministry of Education, Acting Permanent Secretary and her staff, for answering the questions and for being forthright, I think, with the answers, straightforward.

I want to say that the Ministry of Education is a very big enterprise. I mean, you are talking about, based on your own answering, 20,000 people employed in it. You are talking about a nearly $8 billion budget, seven point something billion dollars. You are talking about 300,000 children being managed at any one time between primary, secondary and pre-primary levels of education. They are far-flung all over the place. They have to do with human capital building. They have to do intellectual capital. They have to do with the capacity of the country to use human resource capability to fuel itself in production, productivity, competitiveness, innovation, sustainable development. This is no mean task. Ministries of Education are very, very important things. Schools are critical to the development process and you now have the added responsibility of not just the school system but the entire tertiary sector within the Ministry of Education.

My concern would be how many of the recommendations made by the Auditor General are in fact going to be in place to make sure that there is no repetition when we come to the 2016 audit, or if they have not all been in place, how do we make sure that all of these things are rectified by the time the 2017 audit comes into play?

Secondly, based on the things that are not recommendations but observations that you could improve to make the system more effective and efficient, how are you going to harness the manpower that is required, the organizational capability, and the management systems, to make sure that you have a tighter operation here? Because this is a—I mean, all the execution is done by the schools, and really what you do is policy, and you also do the management of the entire school system. Although in a fundamental way each school has to manage itself one by one and this is a very difficult thing, in my view. But you have a lot of resources. You have a lot of money and it is important to do it well. Because in my view, the entire development paradigm depends on how well you handle education. It is not the only thing in the world, but you cannot do it without it. So, I do not know if you would like to make a response to that. How well can you effect the recommendations of the Auditor General?

Looking at the other observations, do you think within a year or two we can deal with all of these issues so that we do not come back here in 2018 and it is the same old thing over and over again? Because there are things in the Auditor General's report in 2014 and 2015, and I am sure they are going to be in 2016 again, that have been there for the last 15 years.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Chair, there are some things that I noted in the '13/'14, '14/'15, which we have put in place. For example, we have the inventory up to scratch. We have the contracts register. We have that in place. We have taken on board the instances like the void and we also have, one of the things that came up in both reports would be publishing the cheques. We are putting things in place to avoid those things coming up in our other report.

We accept that we have a mammoth Ministry, and likewise a huge responsibility. With the merger of the Ministries we have an increased staff because we have two PSs. We have three Deputy PSs, you know. We are looking at the organization to see how we can manage our billions of dollars better. I cannot say that we will not have anything in a management letter next rounds. We have issues, as I say, with HR. We will still have some overpayments. I cannot say that it will be down to nil. But we are working. We have staff now, a little more staff now, with the merge but then we have more responsibility. But we are looking at it. We are looking at the Ministry as a whole to see how we can look at the structure of the Ministry to see how best we can manage this huge responsibility we have.

We have taken on board, as I said, some of the recommendations and we have put things in the place. Some are not in our control but the ones that are in our control hopefully we will not see them again like, as I say, those registers which we have implemented.

We have to beef up some of our divisions. We are looking, as I say, on the structure, but we have to get—we might have a particular view how our organization should be structured but it has to go to PMCD who will decide whether that is the structure for us. We have a six-year plan that was done. Now, it might have been done prior to the merge. So that, we have to review as well.

We are reviewing our strategic plan, so we know exactly where the Ministry wants to go and what would be required to get it there. We are in the process of going through that plan right now because the last strategic plan was up to 2015 and many things changed around that same time. So, we are in the process of doing that kind of planning, "fore sighting", and seeing how best we can get our Ministry to a point where we can reduce some of those instances and eliminate others.

Mr. Chairman: It is very important that you do that well because you are basically managing the work life and productivity and the development of approximately 20 per cent of the population and if you get that wrong it is a problem. Okay? I just want to close on that note.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Yes. Noted, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: [*Interruption*] **No**, I did thank them before. I thanked them for being very forthright in their answers and making a contribution here. I just want to close, because most of your questions were focused on financial matters and auditing and efficiency, and so on, but I did not want to close on that because I wanted to get the bigger picture. All of this thing that we are trying to address is really because of the bigger picture. Basically, you are involved in a human enterprise of significant proportions and it is important to get it right. Okay?

So, I want to thank you very much. I want to thank you for the work that you do and the contribution that you make to the Ministry and through the Ministry to Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much.

Ms. Sinaswee-Gervais: Thank you very much, Sir. It has been—we appreciate having the opportunity to clarify issues and we have taken on board your final words that we know we have an important job to do and that it is extremely important that we do it properly and correctly. Thank you very much. Have a good evening everyone.

1.47 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned*.